DISCIPLE OF THE LICH
OR HOW I WAS CURSED BY THE GODS AND DROPPED INTO THE ABYSS!
WRITTEN BY Nekoko
ILLUSTRATED BY Yoh Hihara
NOVEL
1

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DISCIPLE OF THE LICH
OR HOW I WAS CURSED BY THE GODS AND DROPPED INTO THE ABYSS!
"A fool has found his way into Cocytus. This isn't a place that humans should visit."

KANATA
"...What?"
"That's what happens when you try to show off."
NOBLE MIMIC
"I...I failed at cooking."
LUNAÈRE

POMERA
"And…who's this?"
"Well, it's complicated…"
PHILIA
"Let's play!"

DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

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NOVEL 1

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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and Dropped Into the Abyss! Vol. 1
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Chapter 1:
The Lich's Disciple
1

"KANBARA, CORRECT? Kanbara Kanata…? Hmm, yes."

A strangely accented voice called my name, so I opened my eyes.

I was floating in a white void. That's the best way I can describe it. There were some black, wave-like *things* floating around me, but when I tried to touch one, my hand passed right through it.

Uhh… Is this a dream?

The owner of the voice stood directly in front of me, dressed in black with lustrous green hair that cascaded around their face. At first glance, they looked kind of masculine…but their voice was clearly androgynous. With their prominent nose and blue eyes, they had a European look.

"Shall I introduce myself?" they asked blandly. "I am a god. Well, to be precise, I am a *Lower* God—a servant created by the Higher Gods. My official name is too long for a human to understand, nor could it be translated into a human language. For convenience's sake, the name Naiarotop will do for now."

Wait, a-a god?

"What are you—?!" I tried to ask before my mouth sealed itself shut.

"*Blah blah blah*. Your chattering is a pet peeve. Allow me to close your mouth for you, so I can keep things moving along smoothly. I will tell you the information you need to know, and you will not annoy me by asking any pesky questions. I will reopen your mouth…later. And if you ask me any pointless questions, I will make sure that your next experience is far more unpleasant."

Their talk about the gods combined with their nonchalant, arrogant tone made me suspect that Naiarotop was a real bullcrap artist. But…on the other hand, I *was* floating in a void with my mouth sealed shut. Maybe there was some truth to what they were saying, even if they were a weird jerk.

"Congratulations," continued Naiarotep. "You have been chosen for my show. My duty—and now your duty—is to provide entertainment for the Higher Gods."

I'm…entertainment?

"Kanbara Kanata. Twenty years old, no serious career." They began ticking off points on their fingertips. "No hobbies, no special skills, not even any dreams for the future. No real friends, no romantic relationships, and no family you are close with."

Harsh but fair. It was a pathetically accurate overview. I didn't have any good friends, passions, or dreams. I didn't even have my parents; they died in an accident while I was still in high school.

"Every now and then, I select a piece of garbage like you—some misfit with no real investment in their home world—and put them in one of my

productions. You have heard of *isekai* novels? Of course you have. They came from your own culture after all! Ah, they are quite something. I find them incredibly enjoyable. So exciting…"

I nodded slightly. There was a whole genre of light novels where the main character was whisked to another world on the whim of a god. I'd even read a few series myself. The characters in those books either survived by using powers granted to them by the gods or knowledge they brought from their original world.

But Naiarotop's talk of a *production* had me worried.

"The Higher Gods find those stories to be quite fascinating," they continued. "But gods are more discerning and extravagant than you humans when it comes to their tastes in entertainment. For that reason, we have created a world suited to humans: Locklore, a fairy-tale world with some medieval fantasy game flair. Slightly different rules from your own world, but what do you think of the idea? Gets the heart racing, does it not?"

Th-they made a world?!

"Locklore wasn't created until after *isekai* novels became popular in your world, but small things like time are trivial to the Higher Gods. Locklore already has ten thousand years of history."

Unbelievable. Thinking about time distortion on that scale made my head hurt, so I cradled it in my hands. A wrinkle of annoyance appeared on Naiarotop's brow.

Not good, I thought. It's better if I just go with the flow and act like I understand. I didn't want to risk getting on Naiarotop's bad side.

"Yes, that is good. I dislike humans who get too clever," they said, almost as if reading my mind. "Now then…time for your debut!"

Snapping their fingers, Naiarotop began to warp space around us. Faces of different shapes and sizes appeared, and a cold chill ran up my spine. Some looked like masks—one even looked like a weird copy of a clock—but they were disturbing no matter what form they took. To make matters worse, they were all staring at me.

"Ha ha ha!" Naiarotop laughed, pressing a hand over their mouth before speaking to me quietly, "The gods want to give you the cheat codes so you can run about Locklore however you want! It will be up to you whether you become a hero or a demon king, or even hide your powers and live an easy life. What do you think? The steaming pile you once called your life could never compare to this, right? Ah, you are such a lucky young man!"

Turning to the crowd of faces, they spoke loudly. "Now then! Higher Gods, with your impeccable tastes, I provide you with a new *main character*! Without your favor, this piece of Earth-spewed trash would surely be reduced to mincemeat in Locklore—a world dominated by magic, swords, and monsters! What shall I give him, aside from the standard skills of Locklorian language and Status Check? And where shall I send him?"

Naiarotop spread their arms and began turning to different parts of the crowd, trying to pitch me as the newest addition to their show.

The Higher Gods' eyes rolled, and their mouths jabbered. Strange, hurried words in an alien language filled the void around me. I couldn't do much more than sit there, dumbfounded and overwhelmed by the experience.

"Hmm…you make excellent points! Yes, indeed. I shall ask Kanata what *he* desires."

At that moment, the power binding my mouth released. It seemed as if I was now expected to speak.

"Come now, tell me what you'd like! But bear in mind that the game would be boring if it were too easy—I *will* have to make limitations." Naiarotop looked at me expectantly.

A thought occurred to me. I knew it would probably make Naiarotop angry, but I had to ask.

"Um. Could I…go home?"

The frantic language of the Higher Gods ceased as soon as I'd said the words, and Naiarotop's face began to twist horrifically.

"What? Why?!" they demanded, pulling me close and whispering. "My research was flawless. You're a human with no friends, family, or prospects on Earth. Are you afraid? Don't worry. I'll set you up with the powers you need—within reason. Don't throw away this chance for a comfortable life."

"L-look…I have a cat. You said that I was alone, but really, Kuromaru is like family to me. He's my buddy. He helped me pull myself together after I lost my parents."

Kuromaru was a stray I found abandoned in front of my house. At first, I didn't want to take him in; I only planned to look after him until I found him a real home. But before I knew it, he'd become like family to me.

I was fairly confident he could get by without me, but…I couldn't just go off on an adventure to another world without saying goodbye. If anyone understood how sad it was to be left behind, it was me.

Naiarotop's face twisted further—their eyes, nose, and mouth swirling together and carving strange cavities into their visage. Some of their hair merged with their face in a way that was really unsettling. I gulped. It seemed like their true name wasn't the only non-human thing about Naiarotop. I was getting an up-close look at their terrifying true form.

"This…this is exactly the kind of reluctant attitude that disappoints me. Get this through your thick skull: learn to read the room." They grabbed me by the shoulders and gestured to the staring gods that surrounded us. "We want to see you strut about, flaunting human traits like greed and selfishness. I went out of my way to find and uplift a loser like you—and now you've embarrassed me. Can you even fathom how much effort went into summoning you? The Higher Gods were eagerly awaiting a new main character in the show, not a refusal from some petulant dweeb. And over what—a cat?! Are you screwing with me?"

Niarotop seemed really upset. But I mean…look, it was their fault for assuming I'd want to come here in the first place.

Naiarotop's face continued to contort and spiral inward. The color of their face, hair, and clothes bled together as they morphed into a weird green monstrosity that looked more like the gnarled roots of a plant than a human being.

"Aah!" I exclaimed as they reached out to wrap one of their horrible green arms around me.

I tried to struggle, but my body wouldn't move. My torso was trapped within their inhuman hand's grasp, and curved talons pierced my back. I thought I was going to die. Terror silenced me as Naiarotop peered at me keenly.

"Actually… No. It's simple to kill vermin, but the Higher Gods demand entertainment. Let's make things interesting and give you a chance instead."

A ch-chance? Am I saved…?

"I had planned to give you some special abilities, but not anymore. I will give you a language skill, and I will grant you the ability to use Status Check. And then…I'll send you off to Cocytus.

"Come now, cheer up!" Naiarotop continued. "Cocytus is like a hidden dungeon in a game. Inside, you'll have the opportunity to acquire Locklore's most powerful items. You'll also have the opportunity to encounter Locklore's most powerful monsters."

A strange circle wrapped in glowing characters of some unknown language appeared, centering itself on me.

"Take a good look, because I don't think you're going to live long enough to see many more magic circles," said Naiarotop, bringing their face close to mine. The human features were almost completely gone, and the void in the center of the spiral stared into me before turning back to the crowd.

"My Masters! I deeply apologize for summoning this *substandard* offering who has failed to captivate your interest," they shouted, lifting me up for the Higher Gods to see. "Please enjoy watching Kanata and finding out how long he will survive—and what kind of death he will encounter!

"You could have had it all, you piece of garbage! Have fun in Cocytus, for I doubt we will ever meet again. Space-Time Magic Level 28: Dimension Gate!"

The magic circle began to sparkle. Light washed over me, and the universe began to twist and warp. I blinked, and suddenly I was somewhere I didn't recognize.

I was in a stone room with somber decorations.

Maybe this is some sort of church?

Along the walls were carvings of demon faces with flames burning in their mouths. The pillars also had carvings, but those looked like humans. Disturbingly, the stone was splattered with dark red stains—probably blood.

“Wh-where am I…?” I mumbled, but I already knew. I was in Cocytus, the most dangerous dungeon in the world of Locklore.

2

I SAT ON THE DUNGEON FLOOR with a bloodstained wall to my back and tried to make sense of the whole situation. What the hell just happened?

If I believed Naiarotop, then I was now in Cocytus, the most dangerous dungeon on Locklore. Instead of killing me outright, I'd been tossed here as part of some sort of disgustingly cruel show they were putting on for the Higher Gods.

"Well…I can't just sit around forever," I said to myself.

Naiarotop said there were fierce monsters here, so it probably wasn't a good idea to hang around. I didn't know if I had the skills to stay alive, but I was going to do everything I could to get out of this labyrinth.

Speaking of skills…Naiarotop said something about standard abilities. It sounded like everyone they transported here got those: "Locklorian" and "Status Check." I had no idea what they did, but they sounded useful.

I seemed to remember Naiarotop saying that I'd get a language skill, so that must be Locklorian. If transporting humans from Earth was part of a show, it made sense they would want those people to be able to interact with the locals. Naiarotop said they modeled their show on *isekai* novels, so it made a weird sort of sense that I could suddenly speak the local language.

The other ability, Status Check, seemed to pop up in those novels too. An ability that let me check information about myself or other people might be handy. But…how did I use it?

"…Status Check," I muttered. Since I was the only person around, I tried focusing on myself.

My mind grabbed onto something. It felt…natural, just as easy as moving my arms and legs. A status window appeared in my mind:

KANATA KANBARA
Race: Human
Lv: 1
HP: 3/3
MP: 2/2
Attack: 1
Defense: 1
Magic: 1
Speed: 1
Skills: Locklorian [Lv: 1], Status Check [Lv: 1]

I-it really worked!

I could tell those were my base stats, but without someone to compare them against, I didn't know how I stacked up. Naiarotop had talked like this world had rules similar to an RPG, so maybe I could level up if I killed a few monsters.

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. I'd been hit with a series of unbelievable events, but I had to adapt. If this was entertainment, it

wouldn’t be much of a show if there wasn’t a way to play the game and stay alive. Sure, there were supposed to be horrific monsters here, but Naiarotop also said that there were powerful items. I needed to find a few of those before I encountered any monsters. Then, with a little luck, I could carefully find my way out of here and learn more about Locklore.

All right. Let’s get moving.

I’d played dungeon crawler games before, delving into randomly generated dungeons to kill foes and get loot. I didn’t like the idea of getting tossed into the deepest part of a dungeon while still at first level, though. If a monster got the jump on me, I probably wouldn’t even be able to run away. I had to be smart and have a plan, or I’d be a one-hit kill.

I placed an ear against the wall to listen for anything moving and then walked out of the room by gliding my feet over the floor so my steps didn’t make any noise.

I’ve got this. I’ll find a way through.

I was actually starting to feel a bit confident despite the dire situation. I guess optimism is one of my few virtues.

Hm…? A dead end.

After walking a while, I came to a rotten skeleton collapsed at the end of a corridor. It smelled of decay and was pretty gross, but I wasn’t too freaked out. I’d seen dead people at funerals—but on second thought, it *was* a bit different when they clearly met a violent end.

At least this surprise came with some good news. A golden sword glittered in the skeleton’s bony hand. This had to be one of those rare and powerful items. With that sword, I could probably handle any monster I ran into.

I hope you don’t mind me borrowing that.

I grasped the sword and pulled. I’m not sure what I expected to happen, but the bones broke and I had to backpedal.

W-well, now I feel bad.

I considered using Status Check on the gold sword, but…I realized it would be pointless. It seemed that having a skill also meant I instinctively knew how it could be used. Status Check only worked on living creatures. I wondered if there was an Identify or Inspect skill.

I pondered this while swinging the sword absentmindedly. Then it disappeared into the wall along with my hand and wrist.

Wait, what?

A moment later, an excruciating pain ran up my arm. I stepped back. From the elbow down, everything was gone.

“Nom, nom, nom…”

Before my eyes, a massive mouth appeared on the wall. It munched up and down noisily, then spit out blood-stained bones along with the gold sword.

Th-that's my arm, I realized with horror. At least what was left of it. Without even thinking, I checked the monster's status and was shocked by the numbers I saw.

Race: Gluttony Mimic
Lv: 1381
HP: 9027/9027
MP: 5919/5919

"Aah! Aaah! Aaaaaah!"

Screaming, I pressed down on the stump of my arm and ran back down the corridor. Behind me, I heard the inhuman voice of the gluttony mimic mumble:

"Thanks for the snack."

I rushed around a corner and collapsed. I knew I had to keep going, but my knees were shaking and I couldn't stand. I could feel my life slip away with every spray of blood that spurted from my mangled arm. My heart pounded in my chest, trying to climb its way up my throat.

I'd been overconfident. Instead of taking this seriously, I'd fooled myself into thinking it was a just video game—but the truth was that there weren't any save points in Cocytus. If I died now, it was game over.

The game was rigged; there was never a way to survive Naiarotop's show. Even if I found an incredible weapon, I was still in over my head.

They dealt me a losing hand.

Consumed with despair, I waited to die.

"Sorry, Kuromaru…"

As I lay on the ground, I heard a loud sound coming closer and lifted my head. I saw a headless humanoid figure coming toward me. Heavyset with gray skin, it was built like a two-meter-tall sumo wrestler. Instead of a head, a huge mouth spread across its stomach.

Race: Predator
Lv: 1821
HP: 9418/9418
MP: 5081/6054

Looks like this place is just crawling with monsters.

I was sure that this was the end. I tried to stay calm, but the predator stopped short.

"J-just do it…" I said, and I saw the predator's mouth curl up at the corners in a cruel smile. It kicked me lightly, flipping me over. Then it placed its foot on my back and pressed down.

"What are…?! Aah!"

It reached down to grab one of my legs and pulled. It wasn't content just to kill me—this evil thing wanted to toy with me. As it tried to break my leg, I squeezed my eyes shut and silently begged.

Please, if I'm going to die, just let it be quick.

My plea was in vain. My knee bent in an unnatural angle, and I felt something give. I screamed. I tried to wriggle away. But the creature's foot pinned me firmly to the floor.

"Help! Somebody, help!" I shouted helplessly.

The predator pressed its weight onto me while I flailed my arms against the floor. My spine buckled, and my ribs broke. I coughed dark red blood onto the stone floor. Gripped by terror and agony, I screamed wordlessly.

Suddenly, a band of black light shot past my vision. I thought the predator had done something, but it lifted its foot from my back and looked around for the source of the dark light.

"Even after all this time, Cocytus is still full of horrible monsters."

Behind the predator floated a girl clad entirely in white. Her cape, covered with golden symbols, fluttered behind her. She had beautiful, porcelain-smooth skin, and her hair was completely white except for its blood-red tips. Her large bicolored eyes—the right was emerald and the left was crimson—bore a cold expression. With a strong nose and a delicate mouth, her features were so perfect, it was hard to believe she was real. She looked more like a statue of the platonic ideal rather than a living person. She gazed at the scene for a moment, then spoke:

"Space-Time Magic Level 24: Erasure."

A weird shining darkness swelled and began to eat away at the predator, like it was trying to swallow the beast whole. The monster flailed its arms in a desperate attempt to escape as its fading limbs passed right through me. When the black light disappeared along with the predator, not a single trace of the monster remained.

The girl alighted on the ground in front of me. She stared down at me with her dichromatic eyes and emotionless face. She'd clearly saved me, so I tried to thank her.

"Theh-eh ugh," was all I could manage.

"Space-Time Magic Level 22: Retrograde."

This time, a white light in the form of a circle swallowed my body. My blood and tissue that had been scattered around the dungeon returned to me. No, that's not quite right… My body *reformed*—knitting and weaving itself back together.

"Aah…" I groaned. The pain in my abdomen and leg dissipated. I watched my right arm, which had been torn off and eaten, reform and stitch itself back together.

Can this even be real?

The girl stared at me, and a shiver ran down my spine as our eyes met. She had a terrifying aura. If she wanted to kill me, she could have done so easily. I owed her my life, yet I couldn't stop trembling.

"Th-thank you… I have no idea what's going on, but you saved me." I bowed my head. She continued to stare at me blankly.

“A fool has found his way into Cocytus. This isn’t a place that humans should visit,” she finally said with a derisive snort.

“B-but aren’t you human too…?”

“I am certainly not! How foolish are you to not see that which is standing right in front of you? I am a lich—I have abandoned life as a human to live forever. After all this time, it’s still a displeasure to be mistaken for a lowly animal like a human.”

“I-I’m sorry…” I bowed my head again. I should have known better. It seemed hard to believe, but the powerful aura she exuded left no doubt that she was far more dangerous than the mimic or the predator.

I waited for her to say something, but minutes passed in silence. It was getting awkward.

Maybe I should say something first? I thought. But what if I offend her and she decides to kill me?

Her expression was impossible to read. I wanted to ask more about her, but how? As the moments slipped past, the awkwardness only grew. Her overwhelming presence made the air feel thick, and it got harder to breathe.

“U-umm…” I started, “I know I’m asking a lot, but could you please help me? If I keep wandering around down here, I’m not going to survive very long.” I steadied myself and bowed low toward her. I really didn’t have any other way to survive, and she’d helped me before, so what did I have to lose?

“Allow me to clarify a misunderstanding you seem to have,” she said.

“Huh…?”

“The reason I live here is because I hate humans.” Her curt words crushed my hope. “They betrayed me, so now I live on the ninetieth floor of Cocytus, deep enough that no human could ever survive.”

Ninety floors?! No way!

With that, I knew I’d never make it out of this dungeon alive. If it were only like one or two floors…then maybe I’d find the exit if I tried really hard. But seriously, the ninetieth floor? What psychopath designed this place?

“Anyway…I have no obligation to help you. I just heard a distant shout and came to satisfy my curiosity. To tell you the truth, I would be happy to see you suffer as much as possible before you die.” she said dispassionately.

“P-please! I swear, if there’s any way I can repay you, I will do it!” I knelt on the floor and pressed my forehead to the ground.

“Space-Time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket.” She stretched out her arm, and a fold opened in space. Reaching in, she pulled out three bottles of pure red liquid before lining them up on the floor.

“These are…something I used to use, but…oh, never mind.” She looked undecided for a brief moment and then reached into the fold again. This time she removed a strange, shiny, rainbow-colored apple. “These are health potions that I made, and this is an everlasting apple. It never

disappears, even if you eat it. With these, any human who managed to make their way down here should be able to make it back to the surfa—hmm, no. I meant to say you should be able cling to life and suffer. Do your best to struggle and die a horrible death."

"Y-you're giving me these?" I motioned at the items.

"Don't misunderstand. I'm only doing this to prolong your suffering."

"Eh… O-okay?" Her expression was so blank, I couldn't actually tell if she was serious. "Thank you… I will use these and do my best." I bowed my head and gathered up the potions and apple, cradling them awkwardly in my arm.

How am I going to carry these?

"Seriously…? You don't even have a magic bag?" she asked.

"A what?"

She facepalmed. Then reached back into the dimensional pocket and withdrew a small blue pouch.

"Just put them in here."

"Uh, but it's so…"

"Trust me, it's bigger on the inside. Everything will fit."

It sounded absurd, but honestly it wasn't the weirdest thing I'd dealt with today. I decided to just go along with it.

"Th-thank you so much…Lich-san?" I said.

"A lich is a magic user who has become undead, not my name. My name Lunaère."

"Thank you, Lunaère-san. I won't forget what you've done for me. I will come back and repay you."

"That's unnecessary. These are only to prolong your suffering."

Maybe she really meant it—her face was so expressionless. But I had a hard time believing she'd make this effort just to let me suffer.

"Okay, then, do your best to survi—suffer. For a long time. Then die." It was like she was self-censoring.

"Th-thanks?"

With that odd conversation over, Lunaère flew away down the hall.

I tried placing the potions and everlasting apple in the blue pouch. Despite its small size, everything fit in easily. It wasn't called a magic bag for nothing, I guess. With a small grunt of admiration, I tied the cords of the bag onto my belt.

But while my situation had improved somewhat, I was still ninety floors deep in Locklore's most dangerous dungeon. Maybe I should have begged her for more help—she seemed sort of nice despite the aura she'd given off. Begging wasn't that shameless when my life was on the line, right?

But Lunaère was already gone, so that ship had sailed.

"I forgot one thing."

"Aah!" I stood bolt upright at the sound of her voice behind me and wheeled around. Lunaère stood there, a sword in her hands.

“I don’t know if a monster stole your weapon, but you appear to be unarmed. You should take this. Think of it as a going-away present for your trip to the grave.” Lunaère threw the sword to the ground, and the tip of the blade embedded itself in the floor. It was an ancient longsword—carved from stone with strange runes engraved into it. It didn’t look particularly sharp, but it must have been incredibly powerful to pierce the stone floor that easily.

“Th-thanks again…”

“Struggle with all your might.” Lunaère flew up and away again.

Really…do I even know how to use a sword? I asked myself. Maybe I should throw myself on the ground and plead for her to come back.

No. She healed my wounds. She gave me items and a useful pouch. She even gave me a sword. Trying to wheedle more out of her would be wrong. Also, I didn’t want to make her angry because she was kind of scary.

I watched her go, then gripped the hilt of the sword and pulled… It wouldn’t come out. For thirty minutes, I pulled and kicked with no success. I even gently stroked the hilt to see if that would make it release. It still wouldn’t budge. The sword just stood there with its blade sunk deep into the floor. I wondered what she thought I was going to do with it.

“With these, any human who managed to make their way down here should be able to make it back to the surfa—hmm, no. I meant to say you should be able cling to life and suffer.”

“Ooh…” I realized. “She thinks that I got down here on my own.”

I shrugged and gave the sword one final tug, confirming that it wasn’t moving.

“Might as well give up on this.”

I still needed a plan to get out of here, so I decided to take inventory. First, I double-checked the things I could carry: the everlasting apple, the three red potions, and the magic bag. The sword was a write-off—it would be staying here.

Second, I had my basic skills and they both checked out. The Locklorian language skill had worked fine during my conversation with Lunaère. Status Check was a little more finicky. It let me see all of my own stats, but when I used it on monsters, I could only see their level, HP, and MP. Maybe there was a way to get more information, but I didn’t get a good chance to fiddle around with it when I was being killed by monsters. At the very least, it would give me a rough estimate of how doomed I was.

This brought me back to the idea that Cocytus should be lousy with powerful items—if I could just avoid enemy attacks long enough to find a few. If I could defeat even just one monster, I’d level up and things would keep getting easier from there. I had no other choice but to stay alive and gain experience.

I guess this is what I’m working with, I thought to myself. I’ll try to stay away from monsters and look for items until I can find a way to get some kills.

Cut to five minutes later, when I was captured by a five-meter frog.

Well, mostly a frog. It had eyeballs stuck all over its translucent-blue body and six legs. And tentacles sprouting from its body. And the top half of a blue-skinned human woman growing out of its back.

Race: Heqet
Lv: 1821
HP: 10623/10623
MP: 11003/11003

The heqet hoisted me high in the air, dangling me from one of its many tentacles.

"They're *so* much tastier if you terrify them first…" it babbled to itself. "I'll start by dissolving your itsy-bitsy fingers and then slowly gobble you up. You should be happy! You and I will become one." The woman half laughed while the eyeball-frog half reached out toward me with a thick, wart-covered tongue.

This is it. I…I'm really going to die this time.

As the tongue wrapped around me, my arms and legs began to melt. It didn't just hurt, it *burned*, but I was too exhausted to even scream.

"Mmm, so fragile. But don't worry. My slime is a powerful acid, but it's also a powerful healing salve. It will never let you drop below 1 HP—you'll remain conscious even as your brain is turned to ooze. Isn't that deliciously terrifying?"

Just before my eyeballs started to melt away, I saw Lunaère flying toward us holding the longsword I'd given up on.

"Don't you know it's rude to disturb people while they're eating? Get lost! Barrier Magic Level 16: Charybdis," said the heqet, and a magic circle appeared along with a dome of water that enclosed us. "Now my little morsel, I've blocked off this area with a shield of water. It consumes lots of my magic, but such is the price of privacy. You're such a rare meal for me, and I'm going to savor you in peace—"

Through my dimming vision I saw a sword tear through the curtain of water, and then the barrier exploded into a shower of mist. Charybdis was broken. Lunaère hovered on the other side of the falling barrier, sword in hand.

"Your constant interruptions are unforgivable, lich girl!" The heqet's woman face twisted into a demonic mask as she turned to face Lunaère. "What is the meaning of this? You've spoiled my appetite, and for this transgression, there can be no reconci—"

"I think we're finished here," said Lunaère, and a vertical line of energy split open the heqet's body. Slime oozed from the wide gash.

"I-impossible…" the heqet croaked as she slumped to the slime-covered floor. "Charybdis is the perfect defense. Y-you even penetrated my thick skin? How could a tiny crumb like you destroy the Queen of Toads?!"

As the heqet's life drained away, the tentacle's grip released and I fell. My body was shapeless after being dissolved by the digestive juices,

and I was sure that I'd be dead as soon as I splattered against the floor. Luckily, Lunaère swooped down and caught me.

Catching me meant she also got covered in the digestive acid. She stood there stiffly, holding me in silence for a few moments. My vision was still a mess, but instead of her usual blank expression, I was pretty sure she looked annoyed.

One of Lunaère's Retrograde spells later, my body had reformed, allowing me to escape death for the second time that day.

"Thanks again." I said, bowing as I sank to the floor. "I was in serious trouble there."

"You're not welcome. I only came back to see how you were—to watch you suffer. What were you thinking? You would be dead now if heqets didn't play with their food." said Lunaère quickly. Though her expression was blank, I could tell she was ticked off.

"I, uh…couldn't pull the sword out of the floor."

"What do you mean? I barely stuck it in."

Slicing toad monsters in half with a single swing must seem normal to her. I realized Lunaère had no idea how ridiculously powerful she was.

"Why didn't you call me when you couldn't pull it out? What kind of pathetic fool thinks they can fight a heqet unarmed?"

"Well, to be honest, I wanted to ask you for more help, but you'd already flown away. And…I was a bit worried you'd eat me or something if I pushed my luck."

"Liches don't eat humans. That's an offensive suggestion."

"N-no, I mean…argh. I'm really sorry! It's just that I'm an idiot!" I backpedaled, but then Lunaère's eyes sparkled and she placed her hand over her mouth.

"Well—there are *some* liches that eat humans…"

I knew it!

When I cringed away from her, Lunaère shook her shoulders and opened her eyes wide.

"I'm not that kind of lich!" she huffed, even though she tried to keep her expression neutral. "Listen, if you managed to make it this far down, you should be capable of crawling your way back out. Stop messing around, take this sword and those items, and go back to the surface."

Lunaère passed me the longsword, which I gratefully accepted. Then the weight of the sword slammed me to the ground the instant she released her grip, breaking my arm and shattering my chin on the goo-soaked flagstones. As I faded from consciousness in a pool of blood, teeth, and toad acid, I saw Lunaère's emotionless face staring down at me.

"Retrograde."

Once my face was back in one piece, I bowed in front of Lunaère.

"I probably should have explained this before, but…I didn't fight my way down here," I said. "Someone transported me directly to this floor."

“Are you serious?” She sounded surprised, and I thought maybe I saw a tiny expression creep across her face, just for a moment. “Impossible. There’s no way to jump between floors with magic. This place is a containment site for monsters, sealed off by an impenetrable barrier since the Age of the Gods.”

Well, Naiarotop *was* a god—even if they were only a Lower God. If there was an Age of the Gods, then they’d be the ones with the magic to get around the barrier.

“Actually…I was sent here from another world by someone who claimed to be a god.” I knew it sounded far-fetched, and she probably wouldn’t believe me. But of all the things I’d met in Locklore, this scary, human-hating lich seemed like the nicest person so far.

“Hmm, a traveler from another world? Maybe…?” she murmured as she rubbed her chin in thought.

Lunaère seemed to be giving it serious consideration. Naiarotop said that other people were sent here as part of their show. If liches really lived as long as Lunaère said, she might have heard about this kind of thing happening before.

“That explains your strange outfit. I’ve never seen a face like yours either. And…you didn’t even know what a magic bag was.”

Maybe she believes me! I thought, but I needed to back my story up.

“I was flung here! I didn’t know I was on the 90th basement floor—heck, I didn’t even know this place *had* ninety floors! There’s no way I can fight against monsters. I’m only level 1 with basic skills and no weapons.”

“Level 1?” The air seemed to freeze around Lunaère. Her expression was still blank, but I sensed intense rage behind her bicolored eyes.

Oh, crap, did I just step on a land mine?

“Look, I’m really sorry! But, I don’t understand anything, and I…”

Lunaère walked up to me, bringing her face just a few inches from mine.

Sh-she’s so close.

“If that’s the case, even those items aren’t going to help you get out of Cocytus.” she said, and then her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “Why didn’t you tell me you were only level 1?”

“You said you hated humans,” I said in a panic brought on by her proximity and aura. “I thought I would make you angry if I asked for more of your help!”

“That’s—!” She swiftly stepped back before adding, “That’s my fault. I apologize.”

She looked down, fidgeting with the hem of her sleeve for a moment. Was there a good person hiding behind that expressionless face?

“Hmm, if that’s the case, what should we do?” she asked herself, chin in hand while she thought. “No matter what I give you, you won’t be able to escape this floor. If you stayed here forever, that would be inconvenient for me.”

If I'm such an inconvenience, why not let a monster eat me? I thought. It seemed like an odd line of reasoning for someone who kept insisting that she hated humans.

"Perhaps I should take you to the exit myself. Otherwise, you will most likely die at some point along the way. It's a miracle you aren't dead already."

She'd get no argument from me. If I had to climb through ninety monster-infested floors, my odds weren't good. Lunaère tilted her head back, finger to her lips.

An idea occurred to me. When I played MMORPGs, people would do something called power leveling. A high-level player would take a newbie along while they hunted. The newbie would get a lot of experience by just being in the group. Did similar rules apply in Locklore?

"So…I know it's asking a lot, but would you be able to train me or something?"

"…Train you?" Lunaère asked stiffly.

"Never mind, it's a dumb idea!"

Lunaère stared at me silently.

"Really, forget I said anything."

"That would mean you'd have to spend a lot of time with me. Don't you fear me?"

"Well, you are kind of scary. But you've been a really kind person—uh, lich—so I wouldn't be afraid. Still, that's asking too much of you."

Lunaère was silent for a few moments. She stared at me like she was looking for something, and then she finally made up her mind. Clearing her throat, she said, "I have no other choice, then. I will train you to the bare minimum level for you to leave here and nothing more. I hate getting involved with humans, but it has to be done."

She approved of the plan!

"R-really?!"

"You'd rather not?"

"Yes, I mean, no! Er, I-I mean, I would like that very much!"

"It's settled. I don't like humans hanging around, so I'm going to train you. It's the only way to get you out of here." she said emphatically.

"I completely understand. The only choice. No other way." I wasn't about to rock the boat.

"You should at least be able to avoid dying from stray shots or accidents. You won't need to win any fights, since I'll accompany you to the exit. So, level 100 should be fine—and it won't take that long either."

She really is *kind*, I thought, but I kept that to myself.

"What's your name? Not that I really care, but training you will be easier if know it. There are some undead creatures who place curses on you by using your name, so feel free to use a fake one if that makes you feel better."

“I’m Kanbara Kanata.” Then I remembered it had been flipped when I checked my status. “Though here it would be Kanata Kanbara, maybe? Where I’m from, we put the family name first.”

“I just said you can use a fake name.” I think Lunaère almost rolled her eyes. “Your complete lack of caution is a liability.”

“I trust you, Master Lunaère.”

“You probably shouldn’t. I told you I’m a lich and I’m only doing this because it’s annoying to have you loiter—Uh, *Master* Lunaère?”

“Lunaère-san? Or is -sama better?”

“…Whatever. I have no interest in what a human calls me.”

“A-all right, got it.”

“Good. Follow me. We’ll head back to my camp, hunting any monsters that show themselves along the way.”

Lunaère turned and began walking away. Her footsteps were buoyant, like she had a reason to be cheerful for the first time in ages.

While she tried to hide emotion on her face, she obviously felt something strongly. I thought she seemed to like being called Master, so I decided to call her that from now on.

3

I FOLLOWED LUNAÈRE DEEPER into the dungeon. In almost no time, she had killed five monsters.

Her latest victim was collapsed on the floor in front of us, covered in blood. It had two glittering, golden, bird-like heads, and its body looked like a golden bodybuilder. Well, that's how it used to look—now the chicken heads were a few meters away from the rest of the body. Its other limbs were scattered around the hallway.

It was apparently a type of monster called a ra. I wondered if people in Locklore knew how pretentious that was.

This ra had swooped down at us with unbelievable speed, breathing fire from its two beaks and burning everything ahead of it with intense flame. I thought I was done for, but Lunaère lunged forward and sliced the gold creature into pieces with her stone sword. She was seriously overpowered.

"Space-Time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket."

Lunaère opened a magic circle and shoved the ra's dead body inside. I wasn't sure why she collected the bodies of dead monsters, but I was afraid to ask. Maybe she used them for potions?

"There's nothing like fresh chicken for dinner," she said.

"Dinner?!"

"Is there a problem?" she asked, her expression blank, though confusion crept into her voice.

"I-I just think its looks a bit too human."

"To me, it looks more like an…overgrown bird."

That was a weird use of the word *overgrown*.

"All right, fine," she said. "I can't have you starving to death. If you'd rather have the bird-like parts, you can eat the heads."

The giant glittering heads weren't what I had in mind when I thought of golden fried chicken. They didn't look edible at all. On the other hand, it occurred to me that there probably weren't many appetizing food options in the bottom of a dungeon.

"Fine. I'll eat the heads," I sighed.

I followed Lunaère through Cocytus a little farther, and we reached a place that was brighter and warmer than any part of the dungeon that I'd seen so far. Oddly, there was dirt under our feet. It didn't seem like the dirt was actually the ground, though. It looked more like a thick layer of soil had been laid over the stone floor.

Grass and even a few rows of pretty flowers grew from the ground. There was also a tree loaded with strange red fruit with white speckles. Somehow, these plants had grown deep underground. Farther into the camp was a large cat sculpture. A bright crystal in its mouth shone with a red light.

“Is that crystal emitting sunlight?” I asked mostly to myself, but Lunaère must have heard.

“Good guess. It’s a sun stone. Worth quite a lot in the outside world because it’s even better for plants than the real sun. Wars have been fought over them on the surface, but they’re just another item that’s scattered about down here.”

Naiarotop wasn’t lying then, at least about the powerful items.

“I wanted one, so I went down to the ninety-fifth floor to look for it. I took it from a gem-loving dragon.”

Isn’t that…burglary?

“We negotiated a deal. I offered not to kill it in exchange for the gem.”

No, that’s robbery.

“It had attacked me with every intention of killing me, after all,” continued Lunaère.

“Ha ha! I see…” Self-defense, then?

Then I asked, “What’s with the weird cat statue? Is it meant to be a sun god or something?”

“…I made the statue for fun as a holder for the stone.”

Crap. I shouldn’t have called it weird—maybe she just really likes cute things. Her eyes look tense. I hope I haven’t made her angry.

Lunaère walked ahead through her garden, which she seemed to enjoy. She had to have been the one who created this space. I doubted that any other monster would have laid down all this soil just to grow some flowers. For someone so unsettling, she had some really cute hobbies. Maybe the scary aura was just part of being a lich?

“This is a nice garden, and the flowers are really pretty. I could get used to it here.”

“No need for flattery,” she said. Her steps became a little lighter, even though she kept her face blank. I hoped I was getting better at reading her.

I walked peacefully through her plants, enjoying the moment, until a cold fluid splattered against my hand.

“Aaah!”

It was clear and slimy.

“Why are you being so loud?” asked Lunaère.

“I got slimed by—” I began before looking in the direction the fluid came from. On closer inspection, the flowers had mouths tucked inside their petals, and they were oozing saliva. Gross, but I didn’t want to ruin the compliment I’d just given Lunaère.

“I-it was nothing.”

“Then try to keep noise to a minimum. But tell me if something is wrong, or otherwise I’ll be annoyed when I find out about it later.”

That seemed reasonable—which was exactly why I wanted to keep her happy. I just nodded and wiped my hand off on my pants.

“And this is my camp,” said Lunaère.

She pointed to a large white hut. It reminded me of a yurt, a sort of tent used by nomadic tribes. It had a rounded frame and a pitched roof, all tightly covered with white cloth.

A vegetable field stood next to it.

It’s a little piece of civilization?! Maybe there’s more on tonight’s menu than that Macho Hen!

“I’d rather not invite a human in, but I can’t have you just wandering around getting yourself killed,” said Lunaère with a sigh as she stood, arms folded, in front of her yurt.

“Really, thank you so much, Master.”

“Don’t bother acting considerate. Humans are like insects to me, so it’s like having a fruit fly in the house.”

Lunaère began to open the door flap to go inside and then froze. She glanced in my direction from the corner of her emerald eye but looked away as soon as our eyes met.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, and she turned to face me, placing her body between me and the yurt’s entrance.

“Would you mind waiting here for a moment? Don’t move. At all,” she said.

“Master?”

Lunaère ducked into the hut, which soon began to emit loud, strange sounds. I even heard a small explosion.

“Master…i-is everything all right?” I called, but there was no reply. Even though Lunaère was only a few meters away, I started to feel a bit lonely and nervous standing around in the depths of Cocytus.

I shuffled a little closer, trying to get a peek through the crack in the tent’s door. Lunaère was stuffing books, bones, and other litter into the mouth of a monster. It was quite a fancy monster too. It looked like a treasure chest trimmed with gold, gemstones, and a mouth full of ivory teeth.

“Lay off, I’m full…” it said with a burp.

“Well, hurry up and swallow! I can’t keep him waiting forever.” Lunaère hissed, pushing another object in despite the treasure chest’s protest. Maybe it used the same magic as Lunaère’s Dimension Pocket. Speaking of which, why was she force-feeding the chest instead of using that spell? The treasure chest was suffering some serious indigestion by the looks of it.

Besides Lunaère and the chest, two headless clay statues were using rags to dust the inside of the hut.

She’s seriously going all out! Seems like a lot of housework on account of a human fruit fly.

I tried to get a look at the other decorations in the room: there was research equipment, stuff for her hobbies, and a lot of decorations made of bone.

“I only have one bed. Wh-what should I do? It’ll be weird if I sleep on the floor and rude if he sleeps there. What’s the most natural thing to do in this kind of situation?” Lunaère asked, still frantically shoving random items into the chest.

“Don’t ask me, Lady, I’m just a treasure *_burp_* mimic.”

“Then you should know a lot about human psychology by now, shouldn’t you?”

What a ridiculous argument.

“I dunno, maybe you two can share the bed?” suggested the mimic in between bites.

“Y-you idiot! How dare you?!” Lunaère’s face turned bright red, and she swept her arms in a gesture, causing a magic circle to appear.

“H-hey, now! Cool it!”

“Space-Time Magic Level 18: Gravity Bomb.”

Just before she lowered her finger to point at the chest, the two clay statues dropped their rags and grappled her to the floor.

“Let me go!”

“C’mon, Lady, relax! That spell will blow away me, the hut, and the guy you’ve got waiting outside!”

Was that powerful spell really necessary?

“I get it, I get it—he’s our first guest ever. But you’re a lich, so don’t get so worked up over…uh.”

The treasure chest’s eyes met mine. Well, to be accurate, it didn’t have eyes, but it did have a gemstone. I took the hint, nodded slightly, and quickly moved away from the door.

I’ll just act casual.

Ten minutes later, Lunaère exited the hut wearing her usual blank expression.

“There was a dangerous gas inside my hut. Dangerous to humans, not to me. I was just removing it because it would be inconvenient for me if you died. Not that I actually care if you die…”

“That was very considerate of you, Master.”

She wasn’t good at keeping up an act, but I could pretend I hadn’t heard the frenzy of sounds easily enough.

“Please enter,” she said and turned to the yurt.

“Thank you. Don’t mind if I do…”

I started to follow her inside, but she stopped in front of the door, blocking my way.

“Um, could you wait a moment? I’m a little nervou—I mean, it’s not like I care—I just…” she stammered.

“Sure, I think I get what you’re saying. I’ll wait a bit.”

It was obvious that she wasn’t emotionally ready for the first human to enter her home. I didn’t understand why she kept up the pretense—it’d be easier for both of us if she’d be open about how she felt. But I gave her a minute anyway.

The yurt was a lot neater than when I'd peeked in earlier—maybe a little too neat. The bones were all gone, along with the bed. She must have decided the solution to that problem was to toss the bed into another dimension and pretend it never existed.

I could feel the treasure chest gazing at me. It and the two golems were sitting in a corner, acting like inanimate objects.

"Are you surprised by how drab it is? I lost my taste for decoration when I became a lich," said Lunaère.

"Ah…"

She seemed to forget that she grew flowers and carved cat statues. It made me feel a little bad. I didn't want my presence to make her feel self-conscious about the things she liked.

I glanced back at the treasure mimic, who was giving me a tiny grin that vanished the moment Lunaère looked in its direction.

That treasure chest has charisma.

"Please, have a seat," said Lunaère, gesturing to the chair in front of her desk. It also happened to be the *only* chair in the hut. She'd worked so hard to make the yurt presentable for me… I didn't want to appear ungrateful, but it also seemed wrong to leave her without a seat in her own home.

"Oh, I don't mind standing," I tried to decline gracefully, but it sounded lame.

"It's all right." She looked around the room for a moment. "I'll sit on the chest."

Lunaère dragged the mimic over to the desk. For a moment, I felt bad. It seemed really undignified for a living being to be used as a chair. At least that's how I felt, until I glanced at the chest and saw that he was grinning stupidly at the prospect.

So! That's how he gets his kicks!

"I'll sit on the chest!" I volunteered. "Please let me sit there! You've done so much for me already!"

"Huh? Fine. I don't really care either way."

I went over to the other side of the desk. The mimic gave me a dirty look, so I stuck my tongue out at him and sat down.

Lunaère passed me a glass of water, which I accepted gratefully.

"So, back to training. As I explained, if we raise you to level 100, then I should be able to accompany you safely to the exit. It shouldn't take much time, as long as I support you."

Well, that confirmed my suspicion that power leveling was possible in Locklore. If we worked together, it would be easy for me to get out of Cocytus.

"Before we start, I'll teach you some basic skills, because you only gain levels if you actually contribute to the fight. You'll need a light weapon, but you'll also need to learn how to use it," she said mostly to herself. "I'll

start teaching you some basic magic right away—simple things you can master easily."

I nodded in agreement, but I was quietly disappointed that this was beginning to sound like real work.

Naiarotop and the Higher Gods might have created this world based on games and light novels, but leveling seemed far more complicated than any MMORPG I'd ever played. Maybe it was best if we didn't take it too fast; diving right in could have fatal consequences for me.

But how long would Lunaère's patience last? She seemed willing enough to work with me now, but that might change if my training took longer than expected. I wasn't even confident that we could find suitable enemies for me in a dungeon like Cocytus.

"You won't be able to contribute to a fight against the monsters around here. I'll make some low-level battle golems for your early training," said Lunaère.

"Oh…" Can she read my mind?

Well, that was one concern gone. If she could make the perfect opponents for me, then this might not be so bad.

"You still have the magic bag I gave you earlier, right? Get off the chest." I stood up, and she opened its lid. She began pulling out heavy books and random objects.

"What's all this?"

"Things I found or things I made. I don't need them anymore, so you can have them. Put them in your magic bag. Here, take this grimoire."

It was a thick, ancient book with a blue cover. I could tell it was magic because there was a creepy circle drawn on the cover. I looked at Lunaère to see if it was okay to open it. She nodded slightly.

My skill at Locklorian didn't help me. I flipped through the book, its pages full of some alien language, until finally stumbling across the one and only page I could read.

ACACIA MEMOIRS
Value Class: Godly
A book that contains details on every race and every item.
This text shall give its owner the knowledge they seek.

I was astonished. I wondered if I ended up on this page because I wanted to know more about the book. Maybe that's how its magic worked.

Value Class: Godly didn't seem like something meant for low-level access. If people went to war over sun stones, then this book could change the world. Just selling it might let me live out a cushy life here in Locklore.

"Are you sure, Master? This book seems too valuable to give away," I said.

"You were sent to this world unarmed and with no knowledge. You need it more than I do," said Lunaère, before hastily adding, "I already know about most monsters and items, anyway."

Her words surprised me. It's not that rare to find someone willing to help when it doesn't cost them anything, but there aren't many people who would give away something precious and ask nothing in return. This lich was a complicated girl.

To defuse the awkwardness, I decided to look up the items as she pulled them out of the chest. First up was a necklace with a red crystal. When consulted, the Acacia Memoirs opened immediately to the corresponding page.

THE SORCERER KING'S RESEARCH

Value Class: Godly

This necklace contains the soul of a king who used magic to unify warring nations. The king devoted his entire life to the study of magic. Within this piece of jewelry, his eternal spirit never fades.

Enhances the wearer's knowledge and understanding of magic.

I looked closely at the crystal in the necklace. Sure enough, some sort of white smoke swirled inside the gem.

I'm not sure I trust this. How do I know it won't try to control me or something?

Well, Lunaère gave it to me, so I was pretty sure I could trust that it was safe. She said she would teach me magic, and this would speed that process along. I put the necklace on.

Next, I picked up a shiny silver ring that also happened to be really creepy. A gaudy design featuring a two-headed snake twirled across either side of the band before eating its own tail. I poked at one of the heads with my finger and opened the Acacia Memoirs.

OUROBOROS WHEEL

Value Class: Godly

A mere shadow of the legendary two-headed serpent that decimated an entire continent during ancient times. The serpent could not be killed, so it was defeated with a curse that caused it to turn to silver and shrink into its current form. Even now, the immortal snake's wicked will sleeps inside the metal.

In case of death, the ring consumes a portion of the wearer's magic power and resurrects them.

"Ah! Are you sure this isn't a cursed item?!" I yelped.

"You should be fine. The amount of magic it uses scales to the wearer's level. It might be taxing if you die several times in a row, though."

That was not what I meant, nor was the answer very reassuring. I reluctantly slid the ring onto my finger.

Lastly, I lifted a plain-looking sword and held it carefully.

Good, it's not heavy. Not too long and not too short, either. Seems easy enough to use.

It looked like a normal sword, but there was a purple gem set in the pommel.

THE FOOL'S MAGIC SWORD

Value Class: Godly
Attack: +300
Magic: +300
A magic sword given by the gods to a person destined to become a hero. The stone is from the Higher Planes, making the weapon incredibly light and powerful, yet still usable by those of low level.
The first owner was assassinated six months after being summoned to this world.
Now that's what I'm talking about—a powerful weapon for a beginner. Ominous description, but beggars can't be choosers, I thought.
Based on the item's name, I guessed that Naiarotop gave someone this sword. Then they got too confident and let their guard down—another life snuffed out for nothing more than the amusement of the gods.
"Good. You shouldn't have any problem using that sword," said Lunaère, relieved that I didn't kill myself by just picking it up.
"Is there some way to know when I can use a weapon?" I asked.
"You can use any weapon that has a lower modifier than your own stats. Usually."
That made sense. All of my stats were listed as *1*. Maybe Locklore had some sort of game-like mechanic that caused the weight of a weapon to be scaled to its power. That would explain why I couldn't even lift Lunaère's stone sword.
With the Sorcerer King's Research around my neck, the Ouroboros Wheel on my finger, and the Fool's Magic Sword in my hand, I used Status Check to see my updated stats.
KANATA KANBARA
Race: Human
Lv: 1
HP: 3/3
MP: 2/2
Attack: 1 + 300
Defense: 1
Magic: 1 + 300
Speed: 1
Skills: Locklorian [Lv: 1], Status Check [Lv: 1]
The modifiers confirmed that my new equipment was the only thing keeping me from certain death. But with a little luck, I might even do some damage to a high-level opponent.
"Enough preparation for now. Time to start your training," declared Lunaère.
"Okay!" I answered, but she seemed a bit dissatisfied.
She's expecting something?
"Thank you!"
She continued to stare at me, as if she expected more.

“Th-thank you, Master…”

Lunaère nodded happily and turned to leave the hut.

She just wanted to hear me call her “Master”, I guess.

I gripped the hilt of my new sword and followed her outside.

“Earth Magic Level 6: Sand Pupa,” said Lunaère as she raised an arm. Dirt from the garden collected over the magic circle that appeared, forming itself into a muscular statue with barely any neck.

“Grah… GRAAAH!” The statue roared and raised its thick arms as it came to life.

“This is a golem,” she said, turning to face me.

“It’s the same as the statues that were cleaning the hut, right?”

“…You saw?”

Crap. I bit my tongue and Lunaère gave me an indignant look. Then I tried to bluff my way out.

“J-just a little, through the crack in the door,” I lied. Just a tiny white lie. “It was just a glimpse. I’m not entirely sure what I saw, actually.”

She let out a sigh of relief, and her face returned to its cool, blank expression.

“I was simply putting away some items that I had out for an experiment. It wasn’t for your sake; they were just in my way.”

“I completely understand!”

I’d better stop blurting out things like an idiot…

“Back to training. I have adjusted the golem’s strength. Even you should be able to defeat it,” said Lunaère as she pointed at its head. *Level 10* was carved in its forehead. Despite the considerate label, I decided to do a Status Check anyway.

Race: Golem

Lv: 10

HP: 34/34

MP: 24/24

That made me feel a lot more comfortable about her training program. Even if it was more powerful than me, its stats weren’t totally unreasonable like monsters I’d encountered earlier. Thanks to my new sword, I should be able to defeat it as long as I could get a few hits in before it clobbered me.

“Earth Magic Level 4: Earth Bind.”

Lunaère’s spell caused earthen ropes to erupt from a magic circle, ensnaring the golem’s arms and legs.

“Aaargh!” it howled, twisting about in rage. The restraints held.

“All right. Go on,” said Lunaère. She shooed me toward the bound golem.

“Uh, right. Here goes nothing,” I muttered. *Could it really be this easy?*

I hesitantly closed in and swung with a horizontal slash. The force of the impact sent the golem flying backward, shattering the hapless creature when it collided into the far side of the cavern wall.

But it wasn't the only one to feel an impact. I was unprepared for the sword's recoil—the shock dropped me to my knees. My shoulder throbbed dully.

S-so much power...

This must be what Naiarotop was trying to tempt me with. This sword might not stand up against most of the monsters in Cocytus, but it sure made an impression on that training golem.

As I caught my breath, I could tell I felt…different, like there was a source of heat inside my body. I used Status Check and saw my level had jumped up to 3! I didn't get full experience from the kill because Lunaère was using magic to restrain it, but the sudden progress was exhilarating.

"Master, I've leveled up!" I cheered, looking back in her direction. She was busy making magic circles all over the garden.

"Earth Magic Level 6: Sand Pupa." Twenty golems appeared around Lunaère, each of them with *Level 10* carved in their forehead. "No time for slacking. Watch your form and try to keep your weight forward as you swing the sword."

H-how long can my shoulder hold out? I dropped my eyes to my arm, which still ached a little.

But Lunaère was making these golems just for me. I couldn't wimp out.

It took almost an hour, but I managed to finish off all the golems. One by one, Lunaère bound them and I cut them down, until my Status Check confirmed I was level 10.

The sword's recoil had less of an effect on me as training continued. Gaining levels didn't stop fatigue from building, though. After defeating the last golem, my arm was shaking so much that I dropped the sword. I bent down to pick it up and collapsed to the ground.

"Are you all right? I didn't realize you were that tired…" said Lunaère, and I thought I heard a little concern creeping into her voice. "Liches have a strong constitution, and I don't think I accounted for that. You should tell me when you're getting tired."

"I-I'll try to remember that…"

I was done for the day. My body and even my mind felt heavy from the exhaustion. Lunaère knelt beside me, bringing her face close to mine.

"May I touch you for a moment? You can say no," she said.

"Huh? G-go ahead…" I offered, noticing how hesitant she was.

She sighed in relief when I gave my permission and gulped slightly. Carefully extending her hand toward me, she tentatively stroked my arm with a slender finger like she was testing the condition of my skin.

Th-that tingles…like her aura is getting under my skin.

It didn’t hurt exactly, but her touch was sort of electric. I tolerated her prodding me with a fingertip, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted her whole hand to grab me. Being this close to her was also uncomfortable in other ways… Her beauty was very apparent, and I could feel a blush forming on my face. I hoped she hadn’t noticed.

“S-sorry, the examination makes me feel a bit, uh, nervous …” I said, and Lunaère’s bicolored eyes locked on to mine in surprise. She pulled her hand away and shook her head.

“Y-your arm is definitely stiff,” she squeaked in a high-pitched voice. “You won’t be able to continue training like this.”

Well, looks like I’m done grinding levels today.

It might seem like a drop in the bucket compared to the monsters in Cocytus, but I’d gained ten levels in just over an hour. Efficient progress for a hard day’s work.

“Space-Time Magic Level 22: Retrograde.”

Lunaère cast the spell, and the familiar magic circle appeared, bathing me in white light. As the pain dissipated and my body regenerated, I could move freely again.

“Thank y—”

“Earth Magic Level 6: Sand Pupa.”

Twenty more golems appeared around Lunaère. Only now, they had *Level 20* carved on their foreheads.

“Continue.”

I blinked in disbelief. My body might have been healed, but my mental fatigue still weighed me down like lead. Then I remembered what Lunaère had just said about telling her when I was exhausted. She’d seemed sincere about not knowing how hard this was for me; a high-level lich probably had no idea how mentally taxing this training program was.

But she was putting so much effort into this—so much effort into…*me*. If I just swung my sword a few times and then gave up, who knew how long it would take for me to get to level 100? I had to try my best.

“…Do you need to stop for the day?” asked Lunaère.

“N-no, I’m fine! My body is healed, and I can keep going!” I replied, thinking, *Sheer stubbornness will carry me through!*

I’d learned how to swing the sword properly, and my stats were higher—but even so, the fatigue made it difficult to put force behind my swings. The level 20 golems caused way more recoil too. By the time I’d hacked through the next round of training targets, my whole body was throbbing.

But she wasn’t done with me. As the last one fell, I found myself surrounded by a fresh set of level 30 golems. I pushed through. At one point, I got careless, and a golem nearly cleaned my clock.

After defeating waves of summoned enemies, I found myself lying on my back, surrounded by shards of dirt and clay. Status Check confirmed I’d made it to level 32.

“You look tired. Shall we stop the training for now?” she asked.

“I-I would appreciate it…”

“Retrograde.”

Another trip through the white light, and my body was healed, but my head was still full of fog. I really should have said something sooner.

“You did well. Your sword handling really improved during the second half of the training. You seem more confident, and your body looks stronger,” said Lunaère while I healed. I might have reached my limits, but those words blew some of the fatigue away.

“Thank you, Master!”

“I’m…still not quite used to being called that. Whatever. You’re free to call me what you want,” she said, but I saw a blush form on her cheeks. She cleared her throat and turned away.

She’s so cute. Makes me feel like I could work even harder.

Not that I wasn’t ready to be done with training for the day, but I was forced to wonder if my lack of motivation back in Japan was because no one ever bothered to compliment me.

I followed Lunaère back to the hut and soon found myself surrounded by a pile of magic books.

“To put it simply, casting magic is the ability to channel power and change the world. Form a magic circle with your mind and then apply the necessary power. That is probably the easiest way to understand magic,” Lunaère explained as I sat on the treasure chest with a book on my lap.

I thought we were done for the day… I thought with a sigh.

I needed to pull myself together. Lunaère was being very generous, and I couldn’t afford to wear out my welcome. I had to get the minimum level and skills I needed as quickly as possible.

“The specifics of the magic circle will vary based on the nature of your magic skill and the situation, meaning you can’t just memorize them,” she lectured. “Having said that, even I don’t completely understand everything about magic, nor can I use every school of magic at will. You can start by learning the formula patterns that make up magic circles.”

I nodded, stared at the book, and hoped it would make sense.

Lunaère tried to explain the contents of the magic books in plain language, adding additional information as we continued. She gave me a small pad of paper, and I rushed to scribble her words in my notes. Thanks to the Sorcerer King’s Research necklace, the magical studies seemed to lodge themselves in my brain, and I sucked in knowledge as she tutored me.

“Not to brag, but I believe I may be one of the world’s best magic teachers,” said Lunaère, obvious pride bursting from behind her serious expression. Her passion about magic was evident. She had loosened up and was talking a little faster than usual. It was getting difficult to keep up with her.

“Now, I will teach you the fundamental magic formulas. There’s this one, and this one, and this one…” Lunaère continued, quickly moving her

hand through the air to form the corresponding magic formulas which appeared as glowing symbols.

"Sorry, could you slow down?" I asked.

A tiny chuckle escaped from the chest (and/or chair) mimic.

Laugh it up, jerk!

For three hours, the lesson continued. My head felt hot. Maybe it was caused by the Sorcerer King's Research. I'd heard of computers overheating when they tried to do too many calculations. Had the necklace overclocked my brain?

"Urgh…" I groaned, laying my head on the desk. I really needed a break.

"Should I use Retrograde?" asked Lunaère. That spell turned back time to heal wounds—that made it great for fighting golems—but it didn't really help mental fatigue.

"I think I'm at my mental limit. Sorry."

"Hmm, mental limit? I have something that improves mood and something else for increased focus…" muttered Lunaère as she searched through the potions in her Dimension Pocket.

Please, no. I can't take any more. My spirit is going to break.

"…Take these elixirs. They'll make it easier to feel the different magical attributes in each spell. We'll cover up to the fourth primary attribute today."

She's doping me! When it comes to magic, this lich has no brakes!

After the lesson finally ended, Lunaère went out to the vegetable patch to gather some ingredients for dinner. I stayed inside, slumped over the desk.

"You still alive?" rumbled the chest.

"Barely," I managed. "S-status Check."

KANATA KANBARA
Race: Human
Lv: 32
HP: 154/154
MP: 138/138
Attack: 45 + 300
Defense: 26
Magic: 38 + 300
Speed: 35
Skills: Locklorian [Lv: 1], Status Check [Lv: 1]Fire Magic [Lv: 2/10], Water Magic [Lv: 2/10], Earth Magic [Lv: 2/10], Wind Magic [Lv: 2/10]

That was a massive improvement, especially for my first day in Locklore. At this pace, I'd hit level 100 in about a week, and then I'd be able to get out of Cocytus.

If I survived training…

4

LUNAÈRE WAS STILL OUTSIDE and I was glancing over the lesson notes when the treasure chest started talking to me.

"So…how's it going? Getting used to being here, uh, Katana? Or whatever your name is…"

"Kanata."

"Sure, sure."

For a talking chest stuffed with random items, he was surprisingly sociable. I tried peeking inside the dark expanse of his mouth as he spoke. Where was all the stuff he swallowed earlier? I couldn't see anything, so some sort of magic must have been at work.

"I-it's going pretty smoothly, thanks to Master," I answered, trying to talk to a box like that was a perfectly normal thing that sane people did. "It's nice not to feel alone, but I can't stay too long. She's already done so much for me, and I don't want to impose. Uh, should I call you Treasure Chest-san or…?"

"Technically, I'm a noble mimic. But sure, whatever works for you."

A noble mimic? Would that make him Chest-dono?

Maybe the "noble" part had more to do with the gold and jewels he was decorated with. He said I could call him whatever, so Chest-san it was. I resolved to ignore the *mimic* part, since that reminded me of the arm-eating wall.

"Chest-san, should we even be talking to each other?" He was always silent when Lunaère was around, so I assumed she must have told him to act like a normal treasure chest in front of me.

"It'd be bad if Lunaère found out. She's worried you might be scared."

"I'm fine with it…"

"Nah, y'see, it's a lose-lose if she knows. We'd either have to tell her you peeked in the tent earlier, or we'd have to pretend I slipped up and just started talking." He shuddered. He seemed pretty unhappy with that set of choices. "But…it would be nice to have someone to talk to other than Little Miss Gloom."

That offended me. Lunaère had done a lot for me in the short time I'd known her, and just because he was familiar with her was no excuse to act like a jerk.

Maybe I need to let him know I won't stand for it…

"Master! Chest-san's talking bad about—" I shouted at the tent flap, trying to scare him a bit. But a fraction of a second later, I was wrapped in his outstretched tongue. "Agh! I'm joking, I'm joking!"

"Knock it off! Nobody likes a rat," he mumbled at me, while reeling his tongue back into his mouth.

I lay sprawled on the floor, relieved that I hadn't become a snack. He scooted in—too close for comfort. I risked using Status Check.

Race: Noble Mimic
Lv: 3022
HP: 17225/17225
MP: 12390/12390
Holy crap, he's strong!

His stats were way higher than the predator or the heqet, and I began to suspect I'd just made a very poor decision. As I prepared for my death, the mimic spoke slowly and quietly.

"I've never seen Lunaère this peppy. Treat her right…or pay the price."

"S-sure! Say no more…"

We sat in silence, staring at each other for a while.

"So…what happened to Lunaère-san, anyway?" I asked.

Lunaère said that to become a lich, a magic user had to abandon human life forever. That meant she was once a human. What betrayal had she suffered? Maybe it was wrong to ask Chest-san instead of asking her directly, but I had to find out.

"I guess you should know." His tone was much more sober than before. "It was a thousand years ago. Lunaère was a magical prodigy, so they put her on a team to take down a demon king."

"What's a demon king?"

"They're kings among monsters. Appearing at random, they lead monster hordes and have skills to draw out and enhance the other monsters' latent powers. But what makes them really dangerous is that they use those abilities to grow more powerful themselves. No limit."

Could that even be possible? That didn't sound like a monster—more like a cosmic phenomenon or a natural disaster.

"Anyway, Lunaère's squad was crushed. They failed to beat the demon king, and that's when she—"

"What an interesting chat," came Lunaère's voice from behind. Both Chest-san and I jumped in surprise. My back went rigid, and even the mimic stretched vertically with fright. I didn't know wood and metal could do that. We turned to the doorway and saw Lunaère looking at us with her cold, expressionless eyes.

"H-he made me tell him!" said the mimic, dexterously folding his tongue into the shape of a finger pointing at me.

Chest-san just sold me out! What a hypocrite!

"We will discuss this later, Noble," said Lunaère.

"Why me?!" questioned the mimic, bouncing with indignation. An icy glare from Lunaère instantly shut down his protest.

He's over level 3000, and he's still scared of Lunaère?!

She slid her gaze from the mimic to me.

I-I'm toast!

"I'm sorry! I was just—" I started.

“I’m glad you were able to chat with Noble. I have a few…points of concern, but I’ll take those up with him later. I now have the ingredients I needed from the garden. Please wait here while I cook dinner.”

“Th-thank you!”

“You are so unfair! Why are you only nice to Kanata?!” demanded Noble. He flopped on his side and thrashed about in a tantrum that was ended by another icy, dichromatic glare. He could dish it out, but he couldn’t take it.

As Lunaère started cooking dinner, I reviewed my notes and chatted quietly with Noble.

“Don’t get your hopes up. She’s terrible at cooking,” said Noble quietly. For a guy who was scared of her, he sure did say a lot of things that might make her angry. I looked toward the kitchen, but it didn’t seem like Lunaère was paying attention to our conversation. I relaxed a little, and he continued.

“Mark my words, it’ll either be a burnt roast or elixirs. You can’t call that cooking,” he muttered.

It was a mean thing to say, but I didn’t doubt it. Lunaère seemed like she’d much rather be doing research than spending time cooking. An image of the two gold chicken heads on a roasting platter floated through my imagination. No matter what she served, I resolved that I’d eat and enjoy it.

“Look—just be kind,” said Noble, leaning slightly toward me almost as if he were bowing. I couldn’t be sure if he was serious or making fun of her.

“If she heard you say that, she’d beat you senseless,” I told him. “Besides, even if she’s not a master chef, she’s still a kind, considerate person. Show some respect.”

“Oh! So you’re the Lunaère expert now, eh? She’s might be acting cool—like everything’s a breeze—but trust me, she’s barely keeping it together.”

“You’re talking nonsense.”

“Look me in the jewel when you say that.”

I ignored him and ran my eyes across my notes. These were just the basics, but it still felt like I had volumes left to memorize.

“Ha! Ignoring me means you know I’m right.” Noble scooted around me, trying to irritate me into responding. Since he’d tried to throw me under the bus earlier, I considered returning the favor…

Instead, I settled for meeting his argument head-on. “I bet it has nothing to do with her cooking skills. She’s been eating alone for almost a thousand years—why do more than the bare minimum? She’s good at making elixirs and potions, which means she’s good with her hands and can follow a recipe. I bet she can cook well if she wanted to.”

“Ok, chief. What do you want to bet she doesn’t come out with a roast or an elixir?”

“Even if she did, it would be fine. There’s no reason for her to make anything fancy.”

The sound of an explosion filled the hut, coming from the direction of the kitchen.

“Monster attack?!” asked the mimic, bouncing in shock.

I immediately grabbed my sword and rushed to the cooking area. If it was a monster, I probably wouldn’t stand a chance, but I owed my life to Lunaère. If she was in trouble, I would risk everything to save her.

Everything in the kitchen had been blown away by a huge fireball. The remains of cooking utensils lay scattered among blackened chunks of monster meat that were splattered on every surface. In the middle of it all stood Lunaère, stunned. I saw the golden ra heads at her feet, but the rest of the ingredients had been turned to ash. My eyes swept over the floor and walls which had been pushed outward by the explosion.

“W-was it an attack?! Are you all right?!” I shouted.

“I…I failed at cooking.”

“…What?”

I must have misheard her. I thought she said she failed at cooking, but this could only be the result of a large spell.

“I’m sorry, it’s not something I usually do. I’m an idiot for even trying.” Lunaère hung her head in disappointment. She was obviously upset, but her tone was flat and cool as usual.

“That’s what happens when you try to show off.” Even though Noble’s comment was kicking her while she was down, Lunaère didn’t respond. She was too upset to get angry at him.

Wh-what should I do? I must find a way to cheer her up… That’s it!

“I can cook! Let me do it!” I said.

“But I can’t make my guest cook—”

“You have done so much already; let me do this! I cook for myself sometimes. I, uh, just don’t know how to use these cooking utensils. Could you show me?”

And so I ended up cooking dinner, and it wasn’t nearly as dangerous as I had feared. The cookware heated itself using magic stones, but otherwise, the basics were pretty much the same.

Noble let me pull some items out of him that looked like they might be ingredients, and I checked the Acacia Memoirs to see what they could be used for. Since the ingredients all came from Cocytus, they were certainly valuable, and I made sure to ask Lunaère for permission to use them. There was milk and meat from monsters, along with vegetables and seasonings from the garden. It was enough to make a stew—probably the most expensive stew I’ve ever made.

When I handed Lunaère a bowl, her eyes widened as if she were looking at a rare treasure. She slowly scooped some up with her spoon.

“Give it a try,” I said.

The moment she tasted it, her entire body tensed and her face turned red. I wondered what was wrong, when suddenly tears started to stream from her eyes.

“I-I’m sorry! I’ve done a terrible job!” I apologized.

“Not at all… It’s been so long since I’ve eaten a home-cooked meal, I just…” Lunaère wiped her tears away and took another bite. “Thank you. It’s delicious.”

I saw Lunaère’s smile for the first time, and it caught me off guard with its brilliance. I might not know what had happened in her past, but I could tell that she was lonely living down here in the depths of Cocytus. A wild idea occurred to me, so I decided to go for it.

“If it’s not too much of a bother, Master…maybe I could just stay here?”

“What?” Lunaère’s wide eyes sparkled for a moment before her face turned red and her lips trembled.

Noble, who had been trying to sneak a bite of stew from the pot, overheard and jumped in surprise. He pensively looked back and forth between us.

Lunaère was silent. I sat there staring, waiting for an answer, until she lifted her face. Her expression had returned to cold, practiced neutrality.

“What are you talking about? I said it’s inconvenient to have you living here. You will complete your training and then leave Cocytus,” she said.

Noble slumped in disappointment.

5

A WEEK HAD PASSED since I'd become Lunaère's disciple, and I was starting to get the hang of magic. Magic circles and formulas were like circuits, and spells were like appliances built out of those circuits. They worked when you channeled magic through them like it was electricity. Once I got that metaphor, it was a lot easier to understand how magic worked in Locklore. Equipping the Sorcerer King's Research necklace certainly didn't hurt either.

While I practiced cutting and connecting magic formulas in the air, my mind wandered back to the first evening I spent in this world. I remembered Lunaère's words when I asked if I could live with her in Cocytus. Even though her answer had been harsh, things had been amicable between us since then.

The morning after she'd turned down my request, Lunaère gave me a black robe. It seemed special, but she said it was just taking up space inside Noble. When I looked it up in the Acacia Memoirs later, it was listed as Lunaère's Robe.

She must have secretly sewn it while I slept. For a mysterious thousand-year-old lich, she wasn't very good at hiding things from me. I felt torn—I wanted to express my gratitude for such a thoughtful gift, but she obviously didn't want me to make a big deal of it.

Not much changed. She still treated me kindly, and Noble still gossiped about her. I thought about ways I could tell her that I wanted to stay, but I never found the right words.

"Are you ready? Let's get going," called Lunaère. I shut my eyes and sat silently for a moment to clear the magic practice from my mind. Then I nodded and stood.

"Hey, Kanata—remember, failure is always an option," said Noble, and I smiled back weakly.

Today was a test to see if I could stand toe-to-toe with a real monster. Over the past week, we had raised my level to 100, so this was essentially my graduation exam. If I passed, I'd be leaving Cocytus for good.

Honestly, I would rather spend more time with Lunaère and Noble.

We left the hut and walked in silence away from her underground garden. She'd seemed more distant than usual since deciding that today would be my final trial. She was the sort of person who kept her own council, but right then, she seemed to have even more on her mind.

Lunaère raised her arm and stepped away from me. "Earth Magic Level 11: Sand Tyrant."

A large magic circle appeared, and the surrounding earth grew into a huge mound. It soon took the form of an earthen dragon, easily twenty meters long. Opening its tooth-lined maw, it let out a ground-shaking roar.

If Earth Magic Level 6: Sand Pupa let Lunaère make regular-sized golems, then Earth Magic Level 11: Sand Tyrant let her make truly gigantic monsters. I'd learned that she could vary the magic power she channeled into Sand Pupa, allowing her to make golems between levels 1 and 100. Sand Tyrant, on the other hand, could be used to make creatures up to level 200.

This earth dragon had *Level 150* carved into its forehead.

"Fire Magic Level 7: Flame Fumes," I said, summoning a wall of fire between the earth dragon and myself. The blaze stretched toward the ceiling.

"What are you doing? Fire magic isn't effective against golems," said Lunaère.

She was right. She'd taught me that during our magic lessons, but the sand tyrant couldn't be easily defeated at a distance—at least not with the spells that I'd learned. My long-range spells were far weaker than my close-range attacks, and not only did this golem have a strong defense, but it was also significantly faster than me. It would catch me if I went in for a direct assault, for sure. My magic *could* work as a distraction, though, and that would let me get close enough to do actual damage.

"Wind Magic Level 3: Fluegel."

The spell generated wind, lifting me into the air. I dispelled a small gap in the curtain of flames before slipping through and flying toward the earth dragon's back. It hadn't seen me move, and its front claws flashed through the fire to gouge the earth where I had been standing.

The Fool's Magic Sword glinted with firelight as I slashed it into the dragon's back. I was relieved to find that it was still plenty effective against enemies of this level. The blade smashed the dragon's earthen armor, creating a burst of dust as a crack ran up its back.

The recoil of my strike sent me flying back into the air. I cast Fluegel again and flew around to one of the dragon's blind spots.

"Grr…?"

The dragon hesitated as it lost sight of me. I pressed the advantage, swooping in to lop off its front leg at the shoulder. The golem roared fiercely as it lost balance and lurched forward. Hoping I could finish this quickly, I began forming a large magic circle directly in front of the sand tyrant.

No luck. The dragon noticed me.

Even though it was off balance, it lunged. Just because this creature was a golem didn't mean it was stupid. A basic principle of magic was that powerful spells took longer to cast. If you could disrupt an enemy while they formed their magic circle, then you could prevent them from casting their spell. The dragon knew it could not allow me to finish.

I reacted, switching one of the formulas to quickly alter the magic circle. It became another Fluegel spell, and the wind pulled me forward. I slipped through the dragon's slashing claws and past its exposed throat. As I passed by, I swung the sword and landed a deep hit.

Its serpentine neck wavered for a moment, and then its huge frame crashed to the ground. I climbed onto its back and plunged the sword in. The golem's body shuddered, then began to crack and crumble into dirt.

It was amazing! I'd succeeded in taking down a level 150 earth dragon without taking any damage. I looked toward Lunaère, who stared back impassively. I had been hoping for…a happier reaction.

"I did it, Master! Mission accomplished!" I called.

"Ah…of course. Congratulations." It was like she hadn't realized the fight was over until just then.

We began walking back to her hut. I wanted to ask her about what would come next—our journey to the surface and my departure from Cocytus. I couldn't find the words, so instead I used Status Check to look at my stats.

KANATA KANBARA
Race: Human
Lv: 136
HP: 547/653
MP: 274/585
Attack: 190 + 300
Defense: 109 + 100
Magic: 163 + 400
Speed: 150
Skills: Locklorian [Lv: 1], Status Check [Lv: 1], Swordplay [Lv: 2/10], Alchemy [Lv: 2/10] Fire Magic [Lv: 8/10], Water Magic [Lv: 4/10], Earth Magic [Lv: 4/10], Wind Magic [Lv: 5/10], Lightning Magic [Lv: 2/10], Ice Magic [2/10], White Magic [Lv: 2/10], Death Magic [Lv: 1/10], Barrier Magic [Lv: 1/10], Space-Time Magic [Lv: 2/10]

Wow! Solo-killing a level 150 sand tyrant gave me a huge level boost!

All the studying and practice had paid off—besides my base level, the number and levels of my skills had also gone up dramatically.

The highest level of magic I'd reached was my level 8 Fire Magic. General speaking, I could only use spells up to the level of magic I had achieved. That is to say, I could confidently cast level 8 fire spells and achieve the desired outcome. I *could* try to cast a level 9 spell, but there was no guarantee that it would be stable. On top of that, it would take more time to cast the spell, and it would be underpowered because I wouldn't be able to channel the proper amount of magic through the circle.

Even though I was nearing the level cap in Fire Magic, that didn't mean my ability was anywhere close to Lunaère's. After level 10, there were new, separate skills for advanced magic. Those fields of magic were really pushing the envelope, delving into secrets known only to elder mages who had devoted their entire lives to arcane study. They sounded unattainable, even with the help of Lunaère and the Sorcerer King's Research.

I wondered if I'd ever learn Space-Time Magic Level 22: Retrograde or the level 24 Erasure spell Lunaère used to save me from the predator. They seemed so powerful compared to my current spells. Just a few days ago, she used Retrograde to heal a small scrape I'd suffered while fighting one of her golems. It seemed wasteful using one of magic's hidden secrets like a Band-Aid.

I chuckled when I thought back to it, but at the same time, it made me sad. It made me remember that my time with Lunaère was coming to an end.

"Master…when should I leave Cocytus?" I asked with a fleeting glance in her direction. I hoped it wouldn't be today, but I didn't know what Lunaère had in mind. Tomorrow, maybe? No, the day after that I hoped. Still, I couldn't guess how she'd respond.

She didn't. She seemed not to have heard me at all.

"Master Lunaère?" I called her name, and she turned around, startled out of her thoughts.

"I was…thinking about something. What were we talking about?" she said.

"I was wondering when I should leave, now that I've reached the target level."

"Well that's, uh…hmm," she stammered, then trailed off in thought once more.

"Master?" I pressed, desperate to know my fate. Lunaère jumped a little in surprise, bicolored eyes darting back and forth in distress.

Finally, she settled on an answer.

"Umm…I think your level probably isn't high enough yet."

"Really?!" That response was totally unexpected! "Didn't you say level 100 would be safe enough?"

Come to think of it, I'd actually reached level 100 yesterday. But then Lunaère said I lacked practical fighting skills, so she arranged for the final exam today. Maybe I hadn't handled the earth dragon as well as I should have.

"Master, I feel like I've gotten pretty strong…"

"No! I mean…it's extremely dangerous outside the dungeon!" Lunaère's face was turning red, and she gestured wildly.

"I-it's more dangerous than inside Cocytus?!"

That sounded ridiculous. This was supposed to be the most dangerous dungeon in Locklore.

"W-well, Cocytus is more dangerous on average, but…outside there are evil, horrifically powerful people and they might notice you. No, they will *definitely* notice you because you're from a different world!" said Lunaère.

"Y-you really think so…?" I'd obviously underestimated the danger on the surface.

“E-even if they’re not as powerful as here, level 1,000 monsters are still everywhere…aren’t they… Yes, they definitely are! You wouldn’t last long, and I can’t guarantee your safety. It’s best for you to stay here and keep training.”

She had a good point. I knew nothing about the outside world. I’d just assumed it would be safe and easy. Naiarotop had said that the monsters in the dungeon were dangerous, but they never said anything about the monsters on the surface. My only experience of this world was being thrown into Cocytus.

Lunaère stared into my face before grabbing the sleeve of my robe. “I thought I wouldn’t worry about you after you’d left, but I’m not *completely* heartless. I can look after you a little while longer.”

We entered the hut and Noble scooted across the floor to me.

“Hey, kid, how’d it go?”

“I soloed a level 150 earth dragon.,” I said.

“Not half bad! And quicker than I expected too.” Noble bounced around as he congratulated me before slumping down suddenly. “Gonna be lonely around here without you, though.”

“Well, actually…Lunaère asked me to stay and train some more.”

“What?!”

“She said I’ll be in danger outside the dungeon…something about people trying to kill me because I’m from another world.”

“If you can handle a sand tyrant, you shouldn’t run into anyone on the surface you can’t…” Noble glanced at Lunaère and snapped his mouth shut. I looked in her direction too, making eye contact before she quickly looked away.

I looked back at Noble. “What were you saying?”

“Nothing…nothing. Just flapping my lid.”

Something feels off here.

After a light magic lesson, Lunaère gave me the rest of the day off. She also let me use some rare ingredients to make a larger dinner than usual—a celebration of my reaching a basic level of competency.

The next day, it was back to the grind. Sword in hand, I followed Lunaère out of the hut.

“How many level 100 golems will I fight today?” I asked.

When level grinding, efficiency was the name of the game. Fighting monsters that were higher than my level was ideal, but sand tyrants were huge. Due to the size of the dungeon’s halls, it was only practical to summon one at a time. Sand pupae might be limited to level 100, but Lunaère could summon a whole horde of them at once.

“I think we should stop with the golems for now. Now that your level is sufficient, I have a…better method.” For some reason, it seemed like Lunaère was hesitant. Were we going monster hunting in the dungeon, now?

“Um…aren’t the monsters on this floor still too powerful for me? Even with your help, I’m not sure I’d be able to contribute enough damage…”

A glancing blow from one of those monsters could kill me outright. Well, with the Ouroboros Wheel I wouldn’t die, but it would still suck.

“Dimension Pocket.” Lunaère opened a magic circle and pulled out a round mirror. Its surface was covered with a cloth that had been embroidered with magic symbols.

“What’s that?”

“…O-open up the Acacia Memoirs and check.”

I took the hint and looked at the Acacia Memoirs.

CURSED MIRROR OF THE WARPED REALM

Value Class: Godly

An ancient mirror created by a king’s alchemist to summon an omniscient demon. The ritual failed, and the mirror became connected to a space between dimensions, allowing other powerful demons to cross over and destroy the kingdom.

This sounds…dangerous. How did she even get this?

I remembered that Cocytus was almost like a disposal site for hazardous material. I suspected that instead of destroying troublesome items, the gods just gathered them up and dumped them in the dungeon.

“This seems like an item that should be handled very carefully.” I said pensively.

“We won’t let the demons out,” she said. I sighed in relief, and then she continued, “We’ll go into the mirror and hunt them there. It should be easy. High-level demons will come to us.”

“Eh… A-are you sure that’s a good idea? What level are these demons?”

“You beat my sand tyrant all by yourself. You’ll be fine. It may be difficult, but the Cursed Mirror is the best way to raise your level quickly.”

Lunaère placed the mirror on the ground. “Come on, we’re going now.”

I steeled myself before responding, “Yes, Master!”

Lunaère’s expression turned uneasy, and she looked away.

What was that about? Something was going on here, but I trusted her.

I stood beside Lunaère. She removed the cloth covering the mirror and turned to me, looking slightly uncertain for a moment. Then she reached out to tug on my sleeve. She pulled me forward, disappearing into the mirror, and I was pulled along behind her.

“Aah! …Unf!” For a moment, gravity stopped working, and then I crashed into the ground. I managed to land softly on my knees before standing up to look around.

This place was…disturbing. Coming from everywhere and nowhere at once, iridescent light illuminated the sky and ground. Behind me was a large black distortion. I guessed that must be our portal home.

Lunaère came to stand by my side.

“Master, where are the demons?” I asked.

Instead of answering, she raised her eyes to the sky.

Overhead were clouds of mist with gaping mouths, carved tentacle statues, and three-eyed neckless cows—all somehow flying despite not having wings. Cocytus might have been dangerous, but this really was Hell. I saw an angel with blood endlessly flowing from its face and an eyeball-covered giant. Hordes of wicked creatures surrounded us.

Are you kidding me?! Maybe they’re all like level 80 or something…

I used Status Check.

Race: %#&h$=

Lv: 3142

HP: 15082/15082

MP: 17595/17595

No way! These things are more powerful than the monsters in Cocytus!

Sure, I could solo a level 150 earth dragon, but what did Lunaère expect me to do against these horrors?

A moment later, the demons began rushing toward us. This was no joke; there were just too many. Lunaère might have been a powerful lich, but even she had to have limits.

“Master! Run!” I shouted.

Lunaère raised her arms, summoning a magic circle five meters across. “Barrier Magic Level 21: Amor’s Sanctuary.”

A pink wall rose from the edges of the circle, surrounding and protecting us from the demons. I heaved a sigh of relief, but the grotesque forms continued to cling and claw at the edges of the barrier.

“Amor’s Sanctuary prevents anything from coming in from the outside, but it’s possible for people and objects to exit,” said Lunaère as she opened her Dimension Pocket, reaching in to pull out a sword. “In other words, you can do this.”

She deftly threw her sword at the pack of monsters. The blade sailed through the barrier, piercing one of the horrors and shattering it into pieces. The demon’s flesh seemed to melt into the surrounding light.

So that was her plan! This way, even I could level up safely inside the Warped Realm. Then it occurred to me that Lunaère had just killed a level 3000 demon with a single hit. It didn’t even look like she’d put that much force behind her throw. What was her level, anyway? I’d never used Status Check on her, but now I was scared to try.

“Just start firing attack magic,” she ordered. “If you can even do a little damage to a creature, I’ll finish it off.”

“Yes, Master!”

A fluffy yellow ball—the weakest-looking demon in the pack—was hanging back from the front lines. I had learned a single level 9 spell to use in just this situation. It took time to prepare and it wasn’t very precise, but I

was safe from attack, and it was the most powerful fire spell I knew. I began forming the two magic circles necessary to cast it.

"Fire Magic Level 9: Dragon Ray!"

A red beam shot through the centers of the aligned magic circles. But instead of striking the target, the yellow demon fuzzball morphed into a doughnut, and my shot passed cleanly through.

How the hell did that miss?!

"Keep shooting," instructed Lunaère calmly, but I had my doubts. Could I even hit anything? And more importantly, would I do any damage if I did land a hit?

I looked out and saw that the yellow demon now had a rage-filled humanlike face. It split into five copies of itself, each growing larger and sprouting multiple muscular arms. I had underestimated it; there were no weak monsters here.

Now five jacked fuzzballs joined the other demons and began pounding on the barrier. It jolted and shimmered with each hit.

"A-are you sure we're safe?!" I cried.

"We're safe." She assured me. "You have the Ouroboros Wheel. And you have me."

I would just have to believe in Lunaère. I probably couldn't hit with magic, so it was time to act like a warrior. The demons were pressed up against the barrier, which gave me an idea. My hand dropped to my sword.

Sitting in front of the shield with its tongue lolling out was a beast with a dog's body and a man's head. Oddly enough, it also happened to be wearing a crown. I lunged toward the grotesque creature and swung my sword at the edge of the barrier. Maybe this was regicide, but go big or go home, right? My blade went straight toward the thing's head, but at the last moment, the dog monster opened its mouth and chomped down on my blade.

"Let go, you damn dog!" I shouted, trying to pull my sword back across the barrier. I couldn't lose this sword; it was the only thing boosting my stats to a level where I stood any chance at all. More importantly, I was borrowing it from Lunaère.

"Let go right now!" she shouted.

The dog monster (King Dog?) twisted its neck, lifting and dragging me through the barrier before it slammed me onto the ground. I groaned in pain.

It dragged me into the monstrous horde, and my body was racked with intense pain. Desperately gripping the sword, my fingers were dislocated and broken by the sheer force of the demon's assault. I looked up and saw King Dog's face immediately in front of my own, and only then did I realize I was outside Amor's Sanctuary. No wonder Lunaère had thrown her sword instead of swinging it—there truly was no return once something left the protective barrier.

"Woof woof woof!"

Ah, this is how I'm going to die.

I felt a shooting pain as my body was ripped in half, and I lost feeling from my abdomen down. After that, I blacked out.

Then I suddenly regained consciousness.

I was collapsed on the ground but back in one piece. The Ouroboros Wheel had done its job and forced a resurrection by consuming some of my MP.

Coming back from the brink of death wasn't a very pleasant sensation, but it beat the alternative. I felt lightheaded and groggy. Though I was in no rush to experience that sort of pain again, the muscular yellow fuzzballs had different plans.

I looked up and found three of them surrounding me. Satisfied grins had replaced their previously enraged expressions. Something told me they weren't the welcoming committee.

Fists swung faster than my eyes could follow as they pounded on me with their beefy, fuzzy arms. They moved so quickly, I could only make out the afterimages of their swings as they pummeled me into a pulp. I lost consciousness again.

Instead of resurrecting in the middle of a demonic wasteland, I awoke on the floor of the hut. Was it a dream? I turned my head and saw Lunaère staring at my face. Our eyes met, and she let out a small sigh of relief.

"The Cursed Mirror is the only way to quickly raise your level to a satisfactory point, but it appears it will be difficult," she said. That confirmed it wasn't a dream…even if it had been a nightmare. "Let's stop there and get plenty of rest today. It must have been hard on you."

"No, let's try again. I'll be fine this time," I replied. To be honest, I never wanted to experience that hell again, but I hadn't accomplished anything today.

I looked at Lunaère, and she turned her face away. "Y-you don't have to force yourself. I might have pushed you too soon. We could still slowly train you against golems…"

I could defeat thousands of golems and still have no chance against those demons. I couldn't stay here with Lunaère forever. Sooner or later, I'd have to leave the dungeon, and I needed to be ready.

"Last time, I panicked and made some dumb choices, but this time I'll get the hang of it!" I said.

"Really…?" Lunaère seemed disappointed for a reason I didn't understand.

Noble just stared at me like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

For the next three days, we kept grinding levels in the Cursed Mirror.

I won't lie, it was still difficult—especially the rest of the first day. But Lunaère supported me, and I managed to reach level 332 by the end of the third day. It wasn't enjoyable, but I got used to it. I was less afraid of the twisted beasts, and I even learned to tolerate the pain of near-fatal damage.

“Dragon Ray! Dragon Ray!”

My fire spell was set to rapid fire. The beam passed through the barrier, and I scored a direct hit on a six-headed, long-necked man that had been foolishly hugging the edge of the barrier. I was getting better at choosing my targets and at getting the timing right.

The six-headed monster shrugged off the pain of my spell, not a single change in his expression. But even that small amount of damage was enough. I had contributed to the fight, and so I’d get some experience.

Without skipping a beat, Lunaère pointed toward the six-headed creature.

“Space-Time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb.”

Black light filled the area around the beast. It tried to flee, but the spell’s gravitational pull prevented it from escaping. Other demons in the immediate area were sucked into the spell’s shining darkness as well. The light spread and then collapsed back into itself before emitting a thunderous explosion. I shook my head; no matter how many times I heard that sound, I never got used to it.

The demons sucked into the Gravity Bomb exploded into a shower of limbs, which then faded into iridescent mist. Some who took a glancing blow from the spell simply collapsed to the ground, half their bodies missing. It was an amazingly powerful spell.

Lunaère took advantage in the lull in action to toss me a vial, saying, “You’re probably running out of magic. Drink this.”

Inside was a glowing green liquid. She’d been supplying me with these since our first day fighting inside the Cursed Mirror. Since we had a moment, I used the Acacia Memoirs.

BLOOD ETHER OF THE GODS

Value Class: Legendary

An elixir. Active ingredient: concentrated brain matter of high-level demons.

It is said to have a composition similar to the atmosphere in the gods’ realm, and it is rumored that an arch-mage once discovered hidden truths of this world after drinking it.

The drinker receives increased spell efficiency and greatly recovers MP.

I wasn’t sure if it was a good thing for me to be chugging legendary potions like water, but I popped the cork out and downed it in one gulp. Our first day in the Mirror, I accidently overdosed on these things and ended up with some nasty poison side effects that even Lunaère hadn’t expected. It was still nothing that one of her Retrogrades couldn’t cure.

Repeated use of the potion improved my courage as well. I was afraid to drink the Blood Ether of the Gods at first, taking it only because I didn’t have any other choice. Lately, I found the buzz enjoyable.

“Dragon Ray! Dragon Ray!” I unleashed another volley of beams at the demons.

“I won’t be able to sustain Amor’s Sanctuary much longer,” Lunaère warned. “I’ll have to let it drop for a moment while I recast—don’t leave my side.”

“Yes, Master!”

Refreshing Amor’s Sanctuary was always risky. If this were the first day, I would have been petrified by the idea of losing the barrier. By now, this was a well-practiced drill. Once it was back up, the spell would prevent new demons from entering—but we had to deal with any monsters that managed to get inside the circle before Lunaère finished casting.

A moment later, the barrier of light winked out, and the demons rushed at us in a wave.

“Woof woof!” came a familiar bark. Leading the pack was a crown-wearing dog man.

There’s that damn dog!

King Dog had killed me nearly ten times now. It was oddly tough and smart, having escaped from even Lunaère’s magic so far. Lunaère had sliced it in half with a thrown mithril sword on the first day, but the next morning, it came frolicking back like nothing happened.

“I’ve finished casting Amor’s Sanctuary” Lunaère said as she moved in front of me and chopped off its crowned head with a barehanded karate strike. She followed up by kicking away a flower monster with hundreds of rootlike feet that was sneaking up behind me.

As I saw the barrier shimmer back to life, a stabbing pain in my side caused my vision to fade. I looked down and saw the head of King Dog merrily gnawing on a chunk of my flesh. I fell to the ground and stuffed my hand into a hole just beneath my ribs.

That damn dog got me again!

Through dimming vision, I saw Lunaère punt King Dog’s head into the distance while the other demons closed in. Then the Ouroboros Wheel kicked in with a resurrection, but I was beheaded by a demon coming from another direction a few seconds later.

When I woke up, I was once again lying in Lunaère’s hut under a blanket. My mind was filled with post-resurrection fog.

Looks like we had to quit training early again. Well, at least we raised my level a bit more.

“Lunaère, shouldn’t you tell Kanata why you keep extending his training?” I heard Noble mumble quietly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I wasn’t fully conscious, and the words didn’t really register, but I could hear Noble and Lunaère talking softly.

“You’re trying to ignore the dragon in the room, Lady. You should tell him you want to be together because you love—”

“Gravity Bomb.” Lunaère quickly and casually pointed at Noble. A magic circle appeared around him, and he stretched his body up in fear.

“It was a joke, really! C’mon, lighten up!”

Lunaère let out a small sigh and dropped her arm. Noble composed himself, returning to his normal shape.

"I know you enjoy his company, Noble, but he's young. It would be cruel to keep a living, breathing human caged down here. We can't do it," she said.

"Fair point…" Noble slouched sadly and then straightened up before pressing his argument. "But…sounds to me like you need to take your own advice."

"Th-that's not true!" said Lunaère, losing her composure and gesturing wildly at Noble. "I'm only doing what I must! If he left Cocytus in his current state, he'd just end up getting killed!"

"…Sorry, looks like I passed out again," I said to Lunaère as I sat up and cradled my head. She trembled in surprise and turned back to look at me.

"Y-you're awake. No need to apologize; it was my fault for underestimating the durability of that demon's head. Enough leveling for today. Let's get some rest," she said.

"I can go again. I'm starting to get used to it."

"Rushing will lead to failure, even with the Ouroboros Wheel. You'll die if your magic power runs out completely. We should rest."

Lately, it seemed like Lunaère was quick to end daily training. Was I really rushing that much?

Noble had been facing Lunaère, staring at her, but suddenly turned to face me instead. "Hey, Kanata…"

I turned toward him to listen, but Lunaère leapt on top of him and pressed down so he couldn't open his lid. Noble struggled and thrashed to no avail.

Wh-what was he going to say?

Four days later, we were still fighting demons in the Cursed Mirror. I had passed the level 1,000 milestone earlier that morning, and now my level was an unreal 1058. We just kept grinding.

Obviously, we still fought from the safety Amor's Sanctuary, but there was one significant difference between now and a week ago: I was casting with advanced magic.

"Fire Magic Level 14: Inferno Sphere!"

I created the magic circle and raised my sword to summon a massive, deep-red sphere of flame.

Unlike Dragon Ray, Inferno Sphere was an area of effect spell that caused incredible destruction—so much that it should never be cast carelessly. It could alter the landscape, and if I wasn't careful, I'd find myself inside the blast radius. But since we were fighting demons in the Warped Realm of the Cursed Mirror, no one was going to complain if I destroyed whatever I wanted.

The ten-meter ball of fire passed through the wall of Amor's Sanctuary and crashed among a pack of monsters. The moment it touched the ground, it grew even more massive. The dark-red flames swelled to fill a huge area outside the barrier, engulfing the demons in fire. I was finally doing some serious damage even if I was still a lower level than the horrors on the other side.

After Inferno Sphere burst, I searched for a demon that had been at the center of the explosion. I found one that looked vaguely human—other than its three eyes, two noses, and four mouths. It also looked slightly scorched and blackened, so I used Status Check to see how I did…

Race: $)Uj~L
Lv: 3012
HP: 14478/15361
MP: 15578/15662

Nice! Almost a thousand points of damage got through.

A lot of demons had strong recovery abilities, so it would be nearly impossible for me to beat one in a fair fight. Even so, Inferno Sphere was the perfect way to contribute to the fight and get experience.

After my level climbed past 500, the Fool's Magic Sword started to feel a little light in my hand. It was time to swap it for something more powerful. Now I was using a heavier longsword with a black blade.

SWORD OF DESPAIR
Value Class: Legendary
Attack: +1100
Magic: +1000
A sword forged for the Demon King Despair. Five hundred years ago, he gathered together the greatest human smiths and declared he would kill any who failed to produce a worthy sword. In the end, he was presented with the Sword of Despair and became so giddy that he accidentally killed its craftsman with a careless swing.

The sword itself is of superlative construction and hides powerful magic.

After the defeat of the Demon King Despair, the sword fell into human hands. Unfortunately, its owners tend to die shortly after obtaining it, leading to rumors that it is cursed.

The history was ominous. I asked Lunaère about the curse, but she replied, “He was significantly weaker than I am. You’ll be fine.” That answer wasn’t entirely reassuring, but I supposed this was just another case where I’d have to trust her.

Cursed or not, the sword was well suited to my current level. It felt a little heavy, but that really wasn’t a problem. Our entire battle strategy consisted of standing inside a barrier and shooting magic.

Back to the fight…

I caught a potion that Lunaère threw to me, downed it in one gulp, and tossed the empty bottle aside. It was another Blood Ether of the Gods. I’d already drunk nearly thirty elixirs today—Inferno Sphere wasn’t a spell with particularly good gas mileage. I rubbed my slightly bloated stomach and readied another magic circle.

“Inferno Sphere!”

Hellfire engulfed the demons outside the barrier again. Lunaère followed up by casting Gravity Bomb, which snuffed out the remaining demons and Inferno’s flames at the same time.

Finished with a hard day of leveling, we returned to the hut. Even though training was tiring, the experience had vastly improved over the course of the week. The Ouroboros Wheel had only resurrected me once during this session.

“Are you all right? We were going for ten hours,” asked Lunaère.

“I’m sorry, Master. I didn’t realize it was a problem.”

“No, it’s no bother. I just thought it must be mentally taxing for you…”

“I’ve gotten used to the fatigue from working constantly. Even the pain from getting tossed around by demons doesn’t seem so bad now—and the buzz from the Ether helps.”

“Is that so…” She seemed somewhat surprised. To be fair, I never thought I’d come so far in two weeks either. “That way of thinking is a bit more…*undead* than I’d expect from a living human. Please be careful. It may be difficult for you to adapt to life outside the dungeon if you become too comfortable here.”

I risked a side glance at Lunaère. Her eyes were opened a little wider than usual, and the corner of her mouth twitched up.

“Master, you’re happy, aren’t you?” I asked.

“I-I most certainly am not! I’m angry!” she huffed.

“Ah…! S-sorry,” I said to smooth things over. *What a puzzling reaction.*

When she thought I wasn’t looking, she patted her face as if trying to manually adjust her expression.

6

I FOUND MYSELF TRYING to craft two magic circles at once, and I thought back to Lunaère's words from a few days earlier:

"You can't… I-I mean you shouldn't leave until you have mastered this!"

She had encouraged me to practice a technique called the Twin-Minds Method—but after consulting a pile of magic texts detailing the method, I still wasn't having much luck.

The gist of the technique was that a caster could mentally divide the two halves of their brain and create "twin minds." Hypothetically, that would let me cast two completely different spells at the same time. Aside from the obvious benefit, the texts indicated that it also would increase my casting speed and accuracy.

The Sorcerer King's Research and Blood Ethers were helping, but this was some seriously advanced magic theory. Lunaère held that any truly competent magician could twin-cast, and in any battle between adept magic users it was assumed that both parties would be doing it. Until I learned this technique, I'd be at a serious disadvantage, slowly casting spells one at a time while the other mage could wear me down without breaking a sweat.

But it seemed hopeless. No matter what study aids were available to me, the Twin Minds Method made my head hurt, and I was beginning to despair. I worried that the abuse I was putting my brain through might be altering my mental structure. Depression started to creep in, and I considered that maybe being from a different world was some sort of magical handicap.

Frustrated and bored, I checked my status.

KANATA KANBARA
Race: Human
Lv: 1211
HP: 5813/5813
MP: 1695/5207
Attack: 1695 + 1100
Defense: 969 + 100
Magic: 1453 + 1100
Speed: 1332 + 500
Skills: Locklorian [Lv: 1], Status Check [Lv: 1], Swordplay [Lv: 6/10], True Alchemy [Lv: 11/20]Advanced Fire Magic [Lv: 13/20], Advanced Earth Magic [Lv: 11/20], Water Magic [Lv: 9/10], Wind Magic [Lv: 10/10], Lightning Magic [Lv: 3/10], Ice Magic [4/10], White Magic [Lv: 2/10], Death Magic [Lv: 10/10], Barrier Magic [Lv: 7/10], Space-Time Magic [Lv: 10/10], Spirit Magic [Lv: 2/10]

At least I wasn't a 3 HP newbie anymore. I never dreamed that after being in Cocytus for a few weeks, I'd be mastering so many diverse fields of magic.

Most of my study time had been spent improving my fire magic skill. The Inferno Sphere was slow to cast, but it was really handy for power leveling. I also spent a fair amount of time prioritizing earth magic, which could be a lifesaver in a tricky battle.

Space-Time magic was…complicated. It took a lot of work for me to get the hang of it, but once I did, it made things a lot more convenient. Dimension Pocket was a game changer; I could quickly access anything I wanted, no matter where I was.

Lunaère insisted on tutoring me in alchemy, and it was a very practical skill for anyone going into battle. As long as I had the right ingredients, I could make essential elixirs to keep me alive and fighting. I even learned how to transmute metals.

"Kanata, I'm starving. Cook me some of your glorious food…" said Noble, bouncing over to the desk and breaking my train of thought.

Wow…! Rude. But I guess a compliment from a glutton is still a compliment.

"…That's what *she's* thinking anyway," he continued. The mimic's tongue formed the shape of an arrow, pointing at Lunaère. She silently pointed her finger back at him, and a magic circle began to form.

"C'mon, I'm just joking!" Noble shuffled across the floor as he moved closer to Lunaère and bowed his lid in an attempt to smooth things over. "You've got a quick temper lately."

"That's not—just don't mock me," she said, her face tinged with pink as she glanced over at me. She wasn't used to being teased with a guest around.

Regardless of how she felt about eating, I was sure that Noble was hungry. I'd lost track of time while studying. I started to put my books away before going to the kitchen, when a passage caught my eye:

The Twin Minds Method is a powerful skill with applications in a variety of fields. Yet it requires incredible talent, vast amounts of time, and a particular mental acumen to master. A human cannot realistically expect to master the method.

Developed in ancient times by a race of functionally immortal beings, the method was then further refined and simplified by dragons who lived thousands of years ago. It takes a century of study for a student to learn the skill. Throughout history, the number of mortals who have achieved mastery can be counted on a single hand.

What?! Then how does she expect me to learn this? Something's fishy…

"Dinner's not cooking itself, chief!" said Noble.

"Okay, okay," I said, standing as Noble prodded me toward the kitchen. The magic text seemed to be a few thousand years old itself…so

maybe things had changed? I pondered that thought on my way to the kitchen.

Five days later, I had a breakthrough. On my right was Fire Magic Level 2: Fireball, on my left was Water Magic Level 2: Waterball.

"O-okay, I can keep this going…" I muttered to myself, somehow managing to maintain the two spells through sheer determination. I felt my jaw clench with stress; this was incredibly strenuous.

"Hey! Look at the arch-mage over here! Not too shabby, kid," said Noble as he scooted over. I didn't have the extra mental bandwidth to respond. I wanted to keep the Twin Minds effect going for as long as possible.

"Kanata, hey, Kanata!" Noble kept calling me.

Ignore him. He just wants attention, but I've got to stay focused.

"Hey, check this out—a sheepshank with clove hitch!" He stretched out his tongue, tying it in a complicated knot. Then with a flourish, he untied it and snapped his tongue back into his mouth with an audible *pop*.

I lost concentration. Both the fire and water balls exploded, burning my right hand and soaking the left side of my body.

"S-sorry, champ. I just had to mess with you a little…"

Frickin' mimic! He can be such a jerk.

I drank an elixir and pushed aside the headache left over from the Twin-Minds Method. Success had been so close.

"You mad?" asked Noble.

"I'm not angry, but…sometimes it's frustrating." I patted Noble's head. "I wish Master had been here to see."

Lunaère was out hunting for elixir materials and food in the dungeon.

"Ha! You're a good egg, Kanata. So…what next?"

"Next is telling Lunaère that I've almost got the hang of this."

"Ehh…"

I let out a heavy sigh. My level was almost unthinkably high now, and I was starting to make real progress. The day when I'd have to leave Lunaère was getting closer.

"I'll get a better grip on the method…and then I'll level up a bit more. I'll finally be on equal footing with the magic users on the surface." I said.

"Huh?" Noble asked, clearly puzzled.

"I mean by getting a little stronger, I'll be able to survive once I leave. Right?"

"Well…" he drawled, "I don't really know much about the outside, but I think you'll do fine," He looked like he wanted to say something else but decided to keep his lid shut.

I went back to thinking about my studies. The Twin-Minds Method should improve the speed and precision of my spells, which seemed almost more helpful than the ability to dual-cast—one spell that hits is better than two that don't. It would definitely speed up the level grind in the Cursed Mirror.

And it would speed up my journey to leave the dungeon.

"Noble-san, don't you ever think of leaving here? Seeing the outside world?" I asked.

"Nah. What's not to like about Cocytus? I can fight all the monsters I want. Scrounge for food. Wander aimlessly through dank corridors. I enjoy life's simple pleasures."

That made him seem more like a dog than a mimic.

"That, and Lunaère's here. You won't find a babe like her outside, that's for sure. Not like you had much luck with the ladies before you got here, am I right?" Noble chuckled, reveling in the chance to be needlessly crude. "But listen—if you thought you'd be lonely, kid, I wouldn't mind going along with you. Other humans can pound sand. But you and me, chief? We got a connection. Besides, I like making fun of you…"

The way he talked made it sound like he had more to say, so I waited quietly for him to continue.

"But, uh…I like making fun of Lunaère even more. So here I stay. Sorry, kid."

He must really care about her. He's known her for longer than I've been alive.

"Why won't she leave the dungeon?" I asked. By now, I was positive that she was lonely before I showed up. While she kept trying to deny that, she did seem sincere in her opinion that I shouldn't stay in Cocytus for long.

Noble was silent for a moment, and I worried that he wouldn't tell me. Maybe that was a taboo topic.

"That was out of bounds. Forget I asked, okay? I'll just go find Master and tell her how my studies are going," I said, getting up from the desk and gathering my sword.

"It's her aura," Noble finally spoke, right before I pushed the door flap aside.

"Her aura?"

"Yeah, part of being a lich. To bring her body back to life, she had to pile a bunch of forbidden spells on top of each other. The aura just comes with the territory."

She used forbidden magic to resurrect herself?

"That's different from what the Ouroboros Wheel does?" I asked.

"Totally. The snake ring doesn't bring the dead people back to life; it just kinda makes a copy of a person right before they die. Besides, she didn't have that ring back then. In fact, she didn't have *anything*—no incredible items, no god-level magic or whatever. So…she did what she had to do. When somebody dies for real, their body rots and their blood turns to poison. With all that corruption, there's no turning back into a living person."

"And Master is like that?"

"Yep. If she hugged a human, they'd wither away in incredible pain. The undead aren't just dead; they are death itself."

Now that he mentioned it, she was always hesitant to touch me. Instead of taking my hand to lead me somewhere, she would carefully pull on my sleeve. I thought she just might be embarrassed to hold my hand. Well…that might also have been true, but maybe she was really trying to avoid touching me directly.

"That's why living humans instinctively fear her." Noble continued. "The aura radiates from her with unholy impurity."

I remembered when I first met Lunaère. I was more frightened of her than the monsters that nearly killed me. But after I had dedicated my life to her and lived in her home, that terror faded away.

"You said you came from another world, right?" Noble asked, thinking aloud. "Maybe because you have no connection to Locklore, the aura doesn't affect you the same way it does the natives. Anyway, Lunaère is a lot happier about that than she'll admit."

So she'd shut herself away to avoid hurting others. Maybe that's why she had been in such a rush to get me out of the dungeon. I tried to imagine how lonely her time here had been. Was it even right for me to leave, now that I knew this?

"Noble, please don't share your opinions as if they're facts." Lunaère was standing in the hut, having returned at some point. He jumped in surprise; he hadn't noticed her return either. "There are a number of ways I could restrain the corruption if I wished. Don't pretend you know everything about me."

Noble tried to blend into the hut's decorations.

"B-but, then why—" I started to ask, but Lunaère's eyebrows crinkled in annoyance.

"Because I hate humans. What's not to understand?" she said coldly.

I had no good response.

7

WE WENT BACK to grinding levels inside the Cursed Mirror. I'd almost lost count of the times we'd entered the demonic Warped Realm. More than a month and a half had passed since I'd come to Cocytus.

I rushed around the world inside the mirror, boosting my speed using Wind Magic Level 3: Fluegel. The low-level spell was still useful for increasing my mobility when I ventured outside the protection of Lunaère's barrier.

Behind me chased a mob of deformed creatures, most of which couldn't keep up. But ahead, a demon came rushing up, trying to cut me off. It was one of the truly weird ones, a large wheel comprised of hundreds of tiny human faces.

It accelerated, pulling up to roll alongside me. Then it cackled madly just before I kicked the wheel into the air and sliced it in two with a powerful horizontal slash. The faces' expressions changed to shock, their eyes rolling as they screamed.

It's still alive…but by the time I finish it off, the rest of the pack will have caught up. I'll leave it for now.

I steadied my breathing and adjusted my course. By now, I had a reasonable grasp of the Twin-Minds Method. I could dual-cast easily, and depending on the spells, I could even manage an occasional triple-cast.

I used Fluegel to turn around in the air and pointed my sword at the pursuing horde. Some of them launched ranged attacks with tentacles or flashes of coherent light.

"Fire Magic Level 14: Inferno Sphere!" My trusty ten-meter ball of crimson flame shot toward the demons.

"Pull back! You're inside the area of effect!" shouted Lunaère from the edge of the barrier. I had it covered. Dispelling Flueugel, I began crafting a new magic circle.

"Space-Time Magic Level 4: Short Gate."

Just as the name implied, it was a short-range teleportation spell. It took longer to cast than Fleugel, but it would instantly move me out of harm's reach. Just as Inferno Sphere landed and scarlet flames expanded to engulf the demons, light from Short Gate's magic circle wrapped around me and warped me to safety.

Given my vastly improved stats and the buffs from my latest magic sword, there was little chance of survival for any of the demons inside the blast radius. Along with the Twin-Minds Method, Inferno Sphere and Short Gate were my bread and butter for level grinding.

"Woof woof!"

It's that damn dog again!

King Dog rushed toward me, cutting through the dying flames. I hadn't yet managed to take him down, but that was going to end here and now.

"Space-Time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb!"

"Ruff…?"

Shining darkness expanded, snatching up the dog and surrounding demons; it dragged them into the spell's gravity well, toward the event horizon. As I lowered my sword, the spell began to collapse, followed by the deep thunder of its final explosion and a shower of demon parts.

"That's the first time you've used that spell in battle," said Lunaère. I'd learned that was her favorite combat spell, so I'd been waiting for a good time to show off. Technically, I wasn't quite powerful enough to keep it stable—I had no doubt that she could cast a much stronger version of the spell—but it was still the most damaging spell in my inventory.

For the past couple of weeks, she'd been taking more of a support role while I ground through an endless stream of experience-filled demons. I was finally strong enough to solo anything the Warped Realm could throw at me.

KANATA KANBARA
Race: Human
Lv: 4122
HP: 17526/19786
MP: 6832/17725
Attack: 5771 + 4300
Defense: 3298 + 100
Magic: 4946 + 3900
Speed: 4534 + 2000
Skills: Locklorian [Lv: 1], Status Check [Lv: 1], Swordplay [Lv: 9/10], True Alchemy [Lv: 16/20] Godly Fire Magic [Lv: 21/30], Advanced Earth Magic [Lv: 17/20], Advanced Water Magic [Lv: 12/20], Advanced Wind Magic [Lv: 13/20], Lightning Magic [Lv: 7/10], Ice Magic [7/10] White Magic [Lv: 4/10], Advanced Death Magic [Lv: 12/20], Barrier Magic [Lv: 7/10], Advanced Space-Time Magic [Lv: 18/20], Spirit Magic [Lv: 10/10]

I'd made so much progress. As Lunaère's magical teachings progressed, I began to learn more support spells and quite a bit more alchemy. My mastery of the Twin-Minds Method had been honed to the point where it was practical to use it in battle. And she'd even insisted that I practice Swordplay by occasionally binding my magic.

"Space-Time Magic Level 4: Short Gate." I teleported over to Lunaère. "Master, I think I'm done for the day. Should we go back?"

Ever since Noble told me about the true nature of her aura, there'd been a distance between us. She tried to act like nothing had happened, but it seemed like she spent more time staring off into space. This was the case

when I stood beside her, gawking at the pile of demonic bodies. I wished I knew what she was thinking.

Lunaère closed her eyes, lost in her thoughts. Then opening her eyes slowly, she said quietly:

“I think your level is—No…I don’t think you need me anymore. Congratulations.”

8

WE RETURNED to Lunaère's hut, and I tried to pretend things were normal. I did some easy magic review, meditated, brewed elixirs—the usual. Once I'd finished everything I'd planned for the day, I started getting dinner ready.

"Look at you, champ! You're even stronger than me now," said Noble in admiration. I remembered how afraid I was the first time I'd checked the level of this absurd monster. Had it only been a few short weeks ago?

"Agreed. He's worked extremely hard to get this far. K-Kana…" said Lunaère, her face flushing. "You, I mean."

She cleared her throat.

What was that about?

"Cut her some slack, she's not used to using people's names," Noble mumbled quietly.

"Th-that's not true! I'm just a little distracted," said Lunaère angrily.

Now that he mentioned it, I realized that she'd never once called me by my name. I couldn't think of a single time.

"I'd like to hear you call me by my name just once, Master," I said, and Lunaère stared at me.

"…And now you're teasing me too?!" she huffed.

"N-no! I really just wanted to hear you say my name, that's all."

"I-I've said it plenty of times before—fine. I'll say it again."

Had she really said it before? Maybe I just didn't remember.

She closed her eyes and steadied her breathing. She was seriously going all out for this; it even made *me* anxious. Her lips parted, but then she clamped her mouth shut again.

Did she seriously just balk? I felt my ears turn hot.

"K-Kanata. Er…Mister Kanata?" she said, turning away to hide her face as she spoke. It was thrilling to hear her say it, but her embarrassment was contagious. I covered my face with my hands so she wouldn't see me blush.

"Y-you don't have to add *Mister*," I said.

Noble's gazed on the scene, perplexed. "What the heck just happened?"

With a spring in my step, I headed to the kitchen to make dinner. I worried that perhaps I was smiling too much, so I kept smacking my face to banish the expression.

The mood didn't last long. When Lunaère stood to help me set the table, Noble asked the fated question.

"So, what're you gonna teach him next?" he asked Lunaère. I gulped when I heard his words. He hadn't been in the Mirror, so there was no way he could have known.

She closed her eyes and stood in silence. Taking the hint, Noble stopped bouncing and waited pensively. Finally, she opened her eyes.

"There is nothing else I can teach. Even without me, you should be able to survive in the outside world. Your training has come to an end."

Her words landed like a blow. I knew this would happen eventually—she'd said over and over that I would have to leave when my training was complete—but I was still crushed to hear it. I simply hung my head in silence. When I was tossed into this world, my only goal was to escape Cocytus, but Lunaère and Noble's friendship had become precious to me. Once I left, I would probably never see them again.

"…H-hey! You're graduating! Congratulations, chief! I'll plan a going-away party about a week from now, and—" started Noble.

"No. He leaves today," said Lunaère, cutting Noble off. The dejected mimic slumped pathetically beside the table. "A mountain of things has gone undone while I've spent time on your training. I-it's not that these days have meant nothing to me, but I don't want you staying here any longer."

"Master…"

"Think nothing of it. I trained you on a whim, just to kill time. And time means nothing to a lich. The past few weeks are barely a moment to me, and the emotions I feel are much weaker than your own. It would be best if you didn't misinterpret things…" she continued.

I had no idea what to say. How much of that did she really mean? She obviously had difficulty expressing her feelings…but her words seemed needlessly hurtful. Or maybe she was right, and I'd truly misunderstood the whole situation.

"Lunaère, is that really what you want?" he asked.

"What do you mean, Noble?" she responded testily.

"N-nothing…"

Lunaère carried the plates of food to the table while I stared at her in disbelief.

"There's one last place I'll take you. We will go there after we eat," Lunaère said.

"Mind if I tag along, Lady?" Noble asked, but Lunaère pointed a finger at him, and he let it drop.

So after an awkwardly silent dinner, I walked alongside Lunaère through Cocytus.

"So…where are we going?" I asked.

Lunaère narrowed her eyes, only saying, "We'll be there soon."

She didn't even look at me when she spoke. That reply was enough to give me a hint that I wasn't going to like whatever came next.

We walked in silence. Even though we were attacked by monsters along the way, Lunaère didn't slow her pace. She simply used barrier magic to block their attacks and space-time magic to crush them like bugs. Sometimes she didn't even bother to turn toward her attacker. I could probably defeat any monster in this area—but not like that.

“Master, I—”

“I am no longer your master.” Lunaère cut me off intentionally, using her curtness as a shield against conversation. I gave up on trying to talk to her.

We finally came to a room lined with large white pillars, each one bearing a statue of an unknown monster. A large staircase led down to another floor. Lunaère stopped walking, and I got the impression that we’d reached our destination.

“Where are we?” I asked.

Lunaère reached into her Dimension Pocket and removed a blue cloth pouch. Why would she want to give me another magic bag? It seemed sort of redundant—I already had one, not to mention that I could use Dimension Pocket myself now.

I stood there, unsure what to do, until Lunaère threw the bag at me. I barely managed to snatch it from the air.

“I’ve placed elixirs, equipment, and some magic books in there. I’ve also given you the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm. Try not to let the demons out,” she said.

“Wh-what…?!”

“I was going to take you up to the surface, but it would be faster for you to go down and use the teleportation circle. You should be capable of doing that now.”

“Wait a second! Are you saying this is goodbye?”

“I am. I knew that if I waited, Noble would be stubborn and try to stop you. If I’m not strict, you’ll end up staying here forever.”

While we walked here, I had a sinking feeling this was going to happen. I just wasn’t ready yet. I stared at her, waiting to see if she would change her mind.

“All right, good luck. I doubt we’ll meet again,” Lunaère said brusquely and then turned to walk away.

“P-please wait!”

Lunaère stopped and turned to face me. I desperately searched my mind for what I might say next. She’d been so generous. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

“M-Master, aren’t you lonely? Staying here in Cocytus all by yourself…aren’t you interested in the outside world?” I asked.

“I told you. I hate humans. Spending any more energy on you would be an—”

“Even I know that’s a lie!” I shouted.

Lunaère’s eyes opened wide in shock. She was quiet for a moment and then let out a heavy sigh. “Would you listen to a long story from a long time ago?”

I nodded. Lunaère’s expression softened slightly, and she slowly began to tell me about the time before she was a lich.

“I suppose I should start a thousand years ago…with my birth.”

Lunaère was born into a family renowned for their magic prowess.

Even as a young child, her father provided her with a comprehensive magical education. Rigorous study—along with her inborn talent—meant that she was one of the most powerful magic users in Locklore by the age of ten.

Then her father died. Lunaère was saddened, of course, but she watched her mother slowly waste away in grief. That motivated the young girl to research the forbidden methods of resurrection—an obsession she hid from those around her. For four years, she studied death magic before finally learning the spells which could raise the dead.

Now, at age fourteen, she understood that the act of bringing her father back would be considered an atrocity. While Lunaère had pursued the dark magic, her mother had recovered from her grief and begun to look to the future. Therefore, Lunaère chose to leave the dark path that she had been walking.

Three years later, a demon king had appeared.

Emerging suddenly and with no warning, the demon king raised an army of powerful monsters. Human settlements were attacked, massacring anyone living there. The fate of the nation was in peril.

Lunaère's magical prowess had not gone unnoticed, and she was drafted as a warrior to hunt and defeat the demon king. Even though this particular demon king was incredibly strong and clever, they managed to locate and engage their foe in battle.

While the main army assaulted the demon king's forces, her small unit of twenty warriors slipped into the demon king's castle. But the fiend was too strong. Over half of the strike force was killed in the assassination attempt, while the remainder fled.

Lunaère's injuries prevented her escape, but she had one final trick up her sleeve. The demon king never suspected that the fatally wounded girl at his feet was also the greatest user of death magic in the kingdom. Using herself as a lure, she drew the demon king close before using a spell to rip out the monster's still-beating heart.

As she lay dying, she worried about her mother. Lunaère knew that after her father's death, she had bolstered her mother's will to live. If she died, her mother would surely spiral into grief and despair. Despite her concern, she knew that nothing could be done—she had only one path forward.

To cast the forbidden spell of resurrection, a mage requires the still-beating heart of a demon. Whether it was luck or fate, she held the demon king's beating heart in her hands. Contained in a dimensional pocket were the other ingredients she'd gathered while attempting to resurrect her father.

She hesitated, but the fear of death spurred her to action. She could not resurrect herself before she died, nor could she cast the spell after her

own death. Instead, she wove a spell into an item set to trigger as the moon rose that night.

That day, Lunaère's life as a mortal human ended. That night she rose as a lich—undead and immortal.

"But…your mom…?" I asked. Lunaère shook her head slightly.

"I could never approach her because of the aura. Even without it, I would be reviled for using forbidden magic. And I knew that… I knew I was leaving my humanity behind."

She didn't go into more detail; she didn't need to. The people around her, the people she'd loved—even her mother—had rejected her.

"That's why I'm not lying when I say I hate humans. I have no interest in going back to the surface. It's better this way," she said.

When I first met Lunaère, she said she hated humans because they betrayed her, but that was only half-true. She knew the consequences for using forbidden magic. The true pity was that she retained her sense of kindness. She never retaliated against the people who rejected her. She simply walked away.

But a thousand years later, those wounds still hurt. It was no wonder she refused to leave Cocytus.

"I was so happy that you treated me like a normal human even though you knew I was a lich. These past few weeks have passed like the blink of an eye, but I truly enjoyed them," she said with a sad smile—only the second time I'd seen that expression on her face.

"Master, then let me stay! I'll stay here forever! I…I care about you! I—"

Lunaère bit her lip unhappily and shook her head. "It makes me happy to hear you say that, but you're not meant to stay here. And…you can't possibly live a happy life if you stay with me. I'm a lich. I'm surrounded by the aura of unholy impurity, a horrific poison that can kill with even an accidental touch."

That's what Noble had said. But…

I moved without thinking. Had I hesitated, the moment would have been lost.

I ran to her, wrapping my arms around her as she hung her head in sadness. She was absurdly powerful, but her body was small and slender. Despite all the trauma and power, she was still just a fragile girl.

"Stop! Wh-what are you doing? The impurity will kill you!" cried Lunaère.

I felt a burning pain across my skin. It was like a high-voltage version of her gentle examination from weeks ago. My breathing became ragged. But after being clobbered by golems and ripped apart by demons, this was a discomfort I could bear. I hugged her tighter.

"It's nothing…because you trained me," I said.

Lunaère's pale cheeks flushed bright red as she looked at me in surprise. I grinned back in return. Maybe I should have raised my level a bit

more. It kind of stung, and a few more levels might have taken some of the bite out of it.

“Let me stay with you!” I begged.

“…Thank you, Kanata,” she said. smiling back sweetly. She closed her eyes and leaned against my shoulder, enjoying the warmth of the embrace.

Then she flung me into the air.

“Huh…?!”

I sailed away from her in a clean arc aimed toward the descending stairwell. My only choice was to use Short Gate. I began drawing the magic circle, but Lunaère was faster.

“Space-Time Magic Level 17: Fracture.”

Sprouting from the center of her magic circle came black, rootlike cracks. They spread over the room, piercing the floor and pillars before glowing with an eerie light and shattering everything they touched. I plummeted through what had been the floor only a moment ago.

I saw Lunaère flying up and away.

“M-Master, why?!” I shouted.

“Kanata…I care about you too. I want you to enjoy everything life has to offer.” Through gaps in the falling rubble, I could see tears in her eyes. “That was something I never got to do.”

Then I lost sight of her. I grit my teeth and shouted, “I will come back to Cocytus! I’ll see the world, and I will come back to see you again, Lunaère-san!”

9

LUNAÈRE'S SPELL knocked me down to the 91st floor, along with several tons of collapsed stone, which turned me into a squished carcass. The Ouroboros Wheel must have activated, because a few moments later, I crawled out of the debris. I pulled a healing potion from my Dimension Pocket, gulped it down, and sat down to rest for a while.

The rubble completely blocked any pathway back. She must have thought I would return if she didn't plug the hole.

Thank you for all you did, Lunaère-san. I'll manage on my own from here.

I resolved that I would return to her one day. She told me once of a powerful barrier surrounding Cocytus, which prevented any teleportation between floors of the dungeon. I knew there must be some power in the outside world that would let me get around that, but for now, I would respect her wishes.

I started off in search of the next set of stairs that would lead even farther down, determined to make my way to the teleporter on the 100th floor.

After walking for a while, I ran into a dead end. There was a shining golden shield embedded in the wall…something about this felt familiar. I walked over and casually snatched the shield from its mount. As I did, the wall in front of me split open to reveal a huge mouth.

Thought so.

I leaped aside to avoid the bite. It snapped a few times, and then its mouth twisted in a frown of confusion.

"N-nothing?" muttered the mouth in the wall before it closed and disappeared. "Darn…"

I squeezed the gold shield, crushing it. The fake gold coating and rusty iron crumbled to dirt.

"Was the other mimic really this slow?" I asked myself.

Status Check revealed it was a gluttony mimic, the same monster that had eaten my arm before. According to the Acacia Memoirs, a gluttony mimic's strength lay in the fact that it used walls as camouflage to avoid attacks. They could move through the dungeon at will, since almost all of the walls were joined at some point. After that, it was just a matter of making fake gold equipment to lure in hapless adventurers or other greedy monsters for a quick snack.

In order to kill it, I had to destroy the wall completely before it could flee.

I pointed at the wall and formed a magic circle. "Space-Time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb."

Black light spread across the wall, before contracting into a singularity. An instant later, the wall broke and was pulled into the center of the spell.

"I'm huuungry!" came the mimic's final cry, just before its sticky bodily fluids splattered across the corridor.

I probably didn't need to worry about monsters in Cocytus anymore. I was overpowered after spending time fighting demons in the Cursed Mirror. I remembered one demon that looked like a stupid goblin. I tried to take it out quickly with my sword, but its entire body split like a sea angel and opened into a mouth. It bit me in half.

Come to think of it, Lunaère said that the Mirror was in the magic bag she had given me as a parting gift. Why would she give me that? Maybe she thought I'd like to grind a few more levels, but…it was sort of a heavy burden.

No matter. The way things were going I didn't expect to have any problems on my way down to the 100th floor, so I got moving.

It took three whole days to make my way from the 96th floor to the 99th. The monsters were slightly stronger, but the real issue was that the floors were abnormally large. Apparently, the deeper you went into Cocytus, the bigger they got. So, after a long day of looking for the next set of stairs, I sat down to have dinner and collect my thoughts.

Tastes like chicken...

I swallowed a bite of roast ra thigh. It looked human, but the flavor was totally like poultry. It smelled a little gamey, but I was grateful to have something that tasted nice when simply roasted, without any fancy herbs or spices. As I chewed, I remembered how grossed out I was when Lunaère killed a ra on my first day.

I really got used to it here.

A few hours later, I reached the stairs leading down to the next floor. They were unique among the stairs I'd seen so far—made from a translucent blue crystal, and nothing appeared to support them. They simply stretched down into an inky-black nothingness.

I descended the stairs and eventually came to a long, wide passage.

"Welcome, covetous human! Providence and tenacity have brought you this far," boomed a voice from deep within. I walked toward it, and the voice continued. "What do you seek in the depths of the world? Did you hear of a potion of eternal youth hidden here? Did some small god tell you that salvation lay within this hall? Or perhaps you're an *explorer*…"

Up ahead was a massive golden throne, occupied by a beast that was at least ten meters tall. He had black, gnarled skin and six arms. Four eyes were set on his face, and large curled horns extended from his head. When his mouth gaped open, I could see sharp rows of fearsome teeth. He was terrifying, but he also had the regal presence of a king.

Lunaère neglected to mention this. I stopped walking and gawked at the impressive figure.

“Any reason to journey here is foolish. I am Satan—a mighty demon, essentially a god—and ruler of Cocytus. During my ten-thousand-year reign, you are only the fifth human to reach this room and bask in my glory. Enjoy it while you can, for none have left alive.” The beast spread his arms. “Come, my instrument of power!”

A large black staff adorned with skulls flew into Satan’s grasp. Satan grinned and stood tall.

Not good.

He was ready to fight, so I drew my sword and made a plan to retreat with a series of Short Gates.

“Allow me to reward you for making it this far.” Satan bellowed, raising the staff with two arms. The remaining four began to trace magic seals in the air.

I’d seen them before inside the Mirror. Seals were used by certain schools of magic…and demons. They increased a magician’s focus and their ability to channel the flow of magic. If a caster was going to the trouble of using a seal, they weren’t going to pull any magical punches.

“Prepare to receive the gift of unholy flame that will burn your body and soul!”

If it’s an area attack, I’d better be ready to teleport.

After his seals were locked in, I concentrated on his magic circle to figure out what spell he was casting…and realized it was one that Lunaère had taught me.

Maybe simply disrupting it would be a safer bet, I thought as I created my own magic circle to mirror Satan’s.

“Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse!” roared Satan with a wave of his staff.

“Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse!” I shouted simultaneously, pointing my sword in his direction.

Two flaming dragons—one from his massive staff and one from my sword—burst forth and flew directly at each other.

“Wh-what?! A human can’t use magic of this level!” Satan’s four eyes opened wide. “No matter! The only thing you have done is given me an opportunity to display the disparity between our powers… You shall be found wanting!”

The dragons collided head-on, grappling one another in an epic battle.

“Behold! Your weakness is revealed!” shouted the demon, a moment before my dragon swallowed his dragon whole and turned toward Satan. His mouth hung open in disbelief.

“Huh,” I said. “You’re pretty much just a normal demon, then.”

I’d been surprised by his use of such a high-level spell, but he wasn’t any tougher than the demons in the Cursed Mirror.

“A n-normal demon?!” stuttered Satan in disbelief before lifting his staff in defense. “P-protect me!”

A magic circle appeared in front of the flaming dragon, and my spell battered against his barrier.

"How unfortunate for you. So long as I possess this staff, your spells are meaningless!"

I understood now. His ability to cast high-level spells and his magical resistance were buffs from the staff. Without that, he probably wasn't any big deal. I readied my sword and charged forward, intent on closing the distance so I could cut him down.

Satan's face went taught. "I-impossible! Where did you come from?! F-fine, I'll drop the staff, just… Wha—?!"

I'd overestimated the magic resistance provided by the staff. The light of the magic circle protecting Satan dimmed and shattered as my spell's power overwhelmed his defenses. My flame dragon descended on Satan.

Ten minutes later…

"I must say, you made that more difficult than necessary, Kanata… Had I known you were a friend of Lunaère's, I would have surrendered immediately." Satan rubbed his six hands together. His regal presence had evaporated; now his entire body was burned raw, and his magnificent horns were broken. The throne and surrounding crystal had been completely blown away.

"Y-you're the one who attacked me…" I said. *This is really awkward…*

Satan had barely any HP left. If his dragon and protective ward hadn't taken some of the energy out of my spell, he'd probably be dead. He'd begged for my forgiveness so desperately that it didn't feel right to kill him. I handed him one of Lunaère's spare health potions.

"Ah, well. That was a close shave… All the monsters in Cocytus would have flooded out if I'd been killed. Did Lunaère not tell you about me?" said Satan.

"Nope…"

The only thing I remembered Lunaère telling me about this floor was that it had a teleporter to the surface. If she had only been down here once in the past thousand years, it was likely she simply forgot that Satan existed. I wondered if this is where she learned the spell Apocalypse.

"May I ask, what business does a friend of Lunaère have down here? It's not about the staff, is it…?" asked Satan, cradling the staff as he looked at me with worry in his eyes.

"Um, no. I'm not really interested in the staff…"

Satan heaved a sigh of relief. Seriously, how could I even carry that thing?

But that got me curious. As he hugged his precious staff, I pulled the Acacia Memoirs out of my Dimension Pocket and flipped through the pages.

BLACK STAFF OF THE APOCALYPSE

Value Class: Godly

A staff that confirms the wielder as the rightful King of Cocytus and provides the necessary power to rule the dungeon. All monsters

sealed in Cocytus will submit to the wielder's sovereignty. The staff assists with the casting of godly fire spells above level 20 and creates an anti-magic barrier around the wielder.

The staff's size scales to the size of the user.

In all honesty, that made it sound pretty useful. There was something to be said for casting high-level fire spells with relative ease, especially since I'd focused on the fire magic skill.

"Huh, it's really powerful…and can change size too," I muttered, and Satan looked startled. It felt really weird to have something so huge act so afraid of me. I shook my head dismissively. "Relax, I'm still not interested."

"R-really? You really mean it?" asked Satan. "Oh, right… Lunaère is still living a few floors up, isn't she?" She must have really worked him over sometime in the past.

I recalled how he'd asked if I was an explorer, which is more or less what Lunaère did in her spare time. It was easy to believe that Lunaère came down here for a casual stroll, ran into Satan, pummeled him, then went home.

"Wait, didn't you say that no one has made it past you alive?" I asked.

Satan was quiet for a moment, then said, "…Lunaère hasn't *left* Cocytus."

That sounded like a win on a technicality. Was Lunaère really the only person to rival Satan in all these years? He was relatively strong, compared to the other monsters, but I had a hard time believing he'd been able to rule unopposed for a millennium.

"Sooo then, what can I do for you…?" he asked. I couldn't resist silently pointing at the Black Staff of the Apocalypse. His face twisted in misery. "You liar! You said you didn't need it! Please, I won't be able to contain the monsters without it! It's *you*… You were the true monster all along!"

"S-sorry, guess I took the joke too far."

"Well, then, why did you come all the way to the deepest point of Cocytus? You must have some important goal," said Satan.

"Master, uh, I mean Lunaère said it would be faster to get out of the dungeon if I came down here instead of going up…"

He looked shocked, then turned his back to me and let out an incredibly heavy sigh. "Follow me—there's an altar in the back. The teleportation circle will take you to the dungeon's entrance. Please…don't come back."

"Sure, thanks… I, uh, appreciate it," I said, following along.

He wobbled as he walked.

10

As Kanata was leaving the dungeon, Lunaère was hunting on the 95th floor.

New monsters had begun appearing in the dungeon, along with items she'd never seen before. For an immortal lich, a treasure trove like Cocytus was quite convenient. It supported both her collection hobby and her magic research. None of the new monsters stood a chance against Lunaère; None of the old ones stood a chance either. Lunaère was truly in her element in the depths of the dungeon.

At least she normally was. Today, Lunaère wandered the halls in a daze.

She thought she'd become used to the endless days of solitary exploration. She'd come to Cocytus in despair, since it was the closest thing to suicide that the undead could manage. For centuries, she lived as an emotionless shade. She really hadn't been introspective about it, because what was the point in that?

But for the past month and a half, she'd spent time with Kanata, a young man who actually admired her. Her world had been turned upside down. Now despair and self-consciousness gnawed at her mind as she tried to slide back into her old habits.

Lunaère's body trembled, and she put a hand on the wall for support.

"…Kanata," she said, murmuring his name regretfully, then let out a small sigh. "I shouldn't have made him leave. I should have helped him become a lich…"

She realized the terrible implications of what she'd just said and shook her head. That would have been unacceptable. She no longer feared the judgment of humans, but she could never forgive herself for such a reckless act.

She gently wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes, remembering Kanata's embrace and how he held her despite the effect of her unholy impurity. Eventually, she regained her composure and let her arms fall back to her sides.

Noble seems worried about me. It's unnecessary…but perhaps I should return early today.

As Lunaère turned to go, she saw Kanata in the distance. Her expression softened, and a warmth spread through her body. She willed her face back to neutrality and started running toward her former disciple.

"K-Kanata, what are you doing here?! I made it clear that you should leave Cocytus! Stop being foolish!"

As Lunaère approached to arm's length, Kanata turned to face her. He had a disturbing, uncanny smile on his face.

"Kanata—!"

His arms wrapped around her.

The thin cloth on Lunaère's shoulders tore away as Kanata's arms swelled. His hands sprouted claws and rootlike tendrils burst from his stomach, piercing Lunaère's body. They lifted her small frame into the air while his elongated arms gripped her shoulders ever more tightly.

"Gah! Y-you're not Kanata! You're a phantasma!"

The creature's unsettling disguise began to fade to white, revealing a frightening humanoid figure wrapped in cloth. Also known as ghost devils, phantasmas could make themselves appear as friends and loved ones in order to fool the living. She should have been immune to such trickery, but her emotional state left her vulnerable.

"Hee hee hee!" giggled the ghost as its tendrils bored deeper into her abdomen.

Focusing her power, she shrugged free of the phantasma's disgusting embrace and placed a palm on its round, white head.

"Space-Time Magic Level 18: Drilling."

The phantasma's head disappeared into the ether as the spell transferred all matter in its path into another dimension. A moment later, its body collapsed to the ground.

Again, Lunaère used Drilling to sever what remained of the tendrils before removing them from her own body. She wiped away a rivulet of pale blue blood dripping from the corner of her mouth and looked at her damaged clothing.

"To think I let a monster do this to me… Space-Time Magic Level 22: Retrograde."

Her injuries and clothing mended while she watched.

Retrograde wasn't healing magic in the conventional sense. It turned back time to reset things to a previous state, and so it wasn't limited to use on the living. Other space-time spells were more efficient at mending inanimate objects, but the magical expense of a spell like Retrograde was trivial for a powerful caster like Lunaère.

"Noble would mock me if he saw me in such a condition…" murmured Lunaère to herself as she walked back to her hut. "I need to get it together."

Later, Lunaère lay on the bed in a daze.

"You were hurt pretty bad, huh?" asked Noble, his casual question concealing his true concern.

"I just don't feel very well," said Lunaère.

"C'mon, Lady. We both know there's no such thing as 'I don't feel very well' for a lich. You were calling Kanata's name in your sleep," said Noble.

Her face turned red. "Liar! Y-you must have misheard! I would never say anything like that!"

"Sure, sure. *I* was lying."

Wordlessly, Lunaère pointed at Noble.

He shut his lid and cringed away from her before continuing. “If you’re so bent out of shape over it, maybe you should’ve just begged him to stay.”

“Don’t be a moron. You know I can’t do something that awful. Anyway, things have just returned to the way they were. I’ll get used to it soon—I have all the time in the world.”

“We could have gone with him…”

Lunaère shook her head. “There’s no place for me on the surface. I wish I could travel the world with him, but the knowledge of my existence would throw the surface into chaos.”

She knew she was right. Throughout history, the methods to pursue immortality had been sought by magicians and kings alike. Entire countries could be destroyed if unscrupulous rulers found out about Lunaère and attempted to seize her secrets. What was her loneliness compared to millions of lives?

“No. I don’t like humans, and it won’t go well if I leave the dungeon. He shouldn’t be burdened with a monster like me either.”

“You think so, huh? So that’s the only reason you’re being so stubborn?”

Lunaère gripped her blanket tightly and pulled it up to hide her face.

“And…he promised. He promised he’d come back…” she said.

“Yeah…?” Noble warped his lid like a raised eyebrow. “But you know he probably won’t come back, right?”

“What are you trying to say?” She dropped the blanket to stare at Noble with her dichromatic eyes.

“Humans change their minds a lot. Even if he feels strongly for you now, five years is a long time for someone so short-lived.”

“…Kanata is not that kind of person.”

“It’s beyond his control. He’s got what…? Eighty, ninety years tops. It’s pretty selfish to expect he’s going to remember you his whole life just because you saved him once. It’s not like you’re going to be the only person who ever helps him.”

“B-but…Kanata said he cared about me, and he kept hugging me even though it hurt him…” Lunaère’s face turned bright red, and she flapped her arms in agitation.

“True. But Cocytus is slim pickings when it comes to pretty girls. You’re the only one down here. Out in the world? Tons of them. And they’ll be living, breathing humans like him. He’s gonna fall in love with someone else.”

“B-but, but…”

“Besides, you don’t get to have your cake and eat it too. You don’t care enough to leave, but you expect him to care enough to come back?” asked Noble as he swayed side to side and let out a frustrated sigh.

“…”

“When you sent him away without telling me, I thought you were just being frigid. I didn’t think you were dreaming up a convenient little fantasy.”

Lunaère was utterly silent. Tears welled up in her big bicolored eyes as she trembled, gripping her blanket tightly.

“Eh, sorry. Maybe I, uh, maybe I said too much.”

Lunaère pointed at Noble again. A magic circle appeared, and the familiar shining darkness surrounded him. He desperately tried to escape, but he was trapped in the gravity well.

“Hey! I’m sorry! Seriously!” The spell began to subside and Lunaère was about to drop her arm. Then Noble felt compelled to add, “But I really don’t think Kanata is coming back.”

“Gravity Bomb.”

The black light warped space and exploded, taking most of the hut with it.

“…Space-Time Magic Level 14: Repair.”

With just a few words, Lunaère returned the hut to its previous state.

“I-I thought I was gonna die… I can’t believe you actually—ahem. I mean, my bad,” said Noble.

“I’ve decided I will go outside,” said Lunaère.

“Good idea, Lady. A nice walk through the dungeon will clear your—”

“Outside Cocytus.”

“…Huh?” he said in disbelief. This was an unexpected development. “But what about the aura? And you’re not good with humans, right? Moral issues?”

“I told you…I can reduce the impact of the impurity if I want to. It will just take some preparation is all.”

“Uhh, yeah, I heard you say that too, but…”

“As for humans… Well, when I was young, my father said that you should choose how to live based on the things you love, not the things you hate. I’ll manage.”

“Taking this a little fast, dontcha think?”

“There won’t be any moral issues as long as I conceal my true form.”

“You’re making it sound easy! Don’t you think you should think about that a bit more?! ”

“Y-you’re the one who drove me to this! So what should I do, then?!”

“I wasn’t really saying you should do anything… I was just sayin’.”

“I can’t keep living like this. I’m going to start working on a robe to diminish the effects of the impurity, but I need to work fast. …Kanata might meet another girl.” muttered Lunaère as she got out of bed and left the hut to gather materials.

Noble stared after her in awe.

“Well, not like I’d say it to your face, but maybe you shoulda made that robe before you kicked him to the curb.”

Chapter 2:
The White Mage Pomera
1

THE TRANSPORTER deposited me in a sun-dappled room where light leaked in through the cracked walls and broken ceiling. I'd made it to the first floor and the exit to the surface.

The ravages of time were much more apparent at the dungeon's entrance than what I'd seen deep underground. Around the large staircase leading back down into Cocytus were rows of collapsed columns and broken statues. Weeds grew from the floor, having taken root between the fractured white stones.

Slipping through the rusted gate that marked the official entrance to the dungeon, I found myself surrounded by a vast forest.

There's got to be a town around here…somewhere, I thought.

Two days later, I was still lost in the woods with no idea where a human settlement might be. I tried to keep walking in a straight line beneath the dense forest canopy. It was impossible to get any sense of direction, and I was worried that twists or turns might lead me to walk in a circle.

It wasn't physically difficult, but my steps still felt heavy with loneliness. I missed Lunaère. I even missed that jerky treasure chest, Noble. After two days of walking, I still didn't feel like eating, but her memory gnawed at me plenty.

I heard a rustling in the distance.

"Who's there?!"

Turning toward the sound, I saw a bear standing on its hind legs. It was easily three meters tall and was looking at me with its three eyes as drool leaked from its bared fangs. Something told me this wasn't an ordinary bear, and a quick Status Check made it official. I was dealing with a Monster Bear.

"Groaaar!" The bear charged at me.

"Sit."

"Grah…?"

I glared at it and repeated the command. It froze mid-stride, left paw trembling and three eyes gazing at me in disbelief. Maybe it *was* smarter than your average bear—this monster seemed to be reevaluating its error in judgment.

"I said *sit*," I repeated. The monster bear dropped to its butt, sitting on the ground like a dog.

"Whuff whuff whuff," it grunted apologetically.

I continued on, listening to its sounds fade into the distance. It hadn't been the first monster to attack me on my journey. Compared to the dungeon, nothing I'd met in the woods was a threat to me so far. Most

monsters I encountered were around level 150—one-hit kills that wouldn't give enough experience to make fighting them worth my time.

I kept walking. Though I saw new trees, the scenery stayed the same. The forest was truly the middle of nowhere.

Then, as I skirted along the base of a ravine, I saw three human figures watching me from the top of the cliff. Finally, other humans! But something about this group was off. Instead of a warm welcome, they had other plans.

I saw the glow of a magic circle, and a clod of dirt the size of my fist came flying at me from above. I didn't bother to dodge; the robe Lunaère had crafted for me would deflect low-level spells. The dirt clod missed and struck the ground, kicking up a spray of dirt.

Was that a warning shot? Maybe I'm trespassing…

As I pondered, the three figures scrambled down the cliff.

"You missed, Damia," said a young man with long black hair and dark eyes. "That doesn't happen often." He was handsome enough in a black robe and a necklace with a cross pendant, but he radiated hostility.

"Sorry 'bout that, Lovis…" said a chubby man. He was wearing worn leather goggles, and he bobbed his head in apology.

"It's fine. Can we just get this over with?" asked the third person, a woman wearing a kimono-like garment.

No…that is a kimono, I realized in surprise. She's got a katana on her hip too.

"What is this? Are you three bandits?" I asked. The one wearing the black robe—possibly Lovis—shrugged dramatically.

"We sometimes engage in banditry, but I prefer a different name—The Black Reapers! Our only masters are freedom and fun. We're less bandits, more…outlaw mercenaries," said Lovis as he stroked his chin. "I'd hoped that you were the Evil Priest Notts. At the very least, I assumed that anyone wandering alone in the Enchanted Forest would be a formidable warrior. But it seems like you've never heard of us… That's disappointing. There's no fun in killing someone like you."

Lovis gazed to his side in annoyance. I really didn't like how this situation was shaping up.

"Sooo…can I go?" I asked.

"Well, now, let's make this more interesting… Ah, here we go. I have a coin," said Lovis. He flipped it into the air before catching it and slapping it to the back of his wrist. "Heads or tails? Guess right, and I'll let you live. Guess wrong, and it's a painful death. You should think very, very carefully. I'm a cruel man, but patient. I'll give you…ten seconds to answer."

Lovis smiled after announcing the rules to his dangerous game. Damia raised a gloved hand, ready to cast a spell. The kimono-wearing swordswoman yawned like she didn't care either way.

I gulped.

It was three against one, and they seem pretty used to fighting other humans. I *had* to guess correctly, but…what kind of money did they even use here? I wouldn't know which side was which even if I could see the coin. I didn't like those odds.

"Could you hurry it up? Running out the clock isn't fun, and we *hate* anything that isn't fun," said Lovis as his eyes narrowed.

No, this wasn't a good time to strike up a conversation about the local currency. My only choice was to guess and be ready to run if I got it wrong. I wondered if I could release a few demons from the Cursed Mirror to slow them down.

"Um, heads?" I replied.

Lovis raised his hand to look at the coin and nodded in satisfaction. He slipped it back in his pocket and applauded.

"Congratulations, a god must be smiling upon you…"

"Great! Well, I'll be going then—" I started.

"…A god of *Death*! Damia, blow his limbs off," commanded Lovis, raising an arm to point at me.

Readying my sword, I fell into a combat stance. I might have lost the game, but I wasn't going down without a fight.

"Legs first!" said Damia with a grin as he made a magic circle. "Earth Magic Level 4: Clod Missile!"

The clod of earth came flying toward me and once again deflected to crash at my feet with a bang. As the dust settled, I saw Damia staring at me with his mouth agape.

…That's it?

"I-it didn't hit?" cried Damia.

"No, it's more than that—look, his clothes aren't even dirty. That wouldn't happen if you just missed," interjected Lovis.

"Are you guys just messing with me? I thought you saw me repel that low-level spell a few minutes ago," I said.

"Wh-what…?!" Damia lost his nerve.

"Fascinating. He's got some sort of resistance. Well…he *was* wandering this deep in the Enchanted Forest by himself. Looks like this might be fun after all." The corners of Lovis's mouth curled up in a cruel smile.

"Damia doesn't seem well suited to this fight," said the kimono-wearing woman, her eyes narrowing as she placed a hand on her sword's scabbard and stepped forward. Her boredom was replaced with lethal seriousness. Lovis raised a hand to halt her.

"Damia, Yozakura, stand down. It's been a long time since I had a true challenge." Lovis stepped forward with a flourish. "Space-Time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket."

A magic circle appeared, and he reached inside to withdraw a massive scythe, easily as tall as he was.

"I was getting a little complacent, what with people calling me the Outlaw King. I never thought someone would have the gall to stand in front of me and say they'd never heard of me. That's fine, but surely you've heard of the Moonlit Scythe—taker of one thousand heads?"

The crescent edge was razor-keen, with gray vines etched along the blade's face.

"That's, uh, a very nice scythe," I said. I'd never heard of it either.

“It’s been so long since I fought a worthy opponent…I’m giddy! First, a test of your strength. Don’t hold back!” Lovis rushed toward me. “Let’s see what you make of this. Space-Time Magic Level 4: Short Gate.”

He blinked out of existence, reappearing behind me to swing his scythe from my blind spot. I parried with my sword.

Huh…that felt kind of weak.

“Nice catch. You’ve passed stage one. Let’s try another,” said Lovis. “Short Gate!”

Grinning widely, he attacked from another direction. I parried again.

“Ooh, so you can block that too?”

He’s got to be holding back, right?

“Short Gate! Short Gate!” said Lovis, thoroughly enjoying himself. As soon as I saw him disappear, he’d move to my blind spot, swing and disappear again. That seemed to be his only move.

“I see it so rarely, but Lovis’s fighting style is an artform!” said Damia with admiration.

“Something’s weird here,” said Yozakura, her eyes narrowing doubtfully. “I can’t believe this guy has survived this long in the forest or that he’s never heard of us.”

He takes so long to draw his magic circles. Is he so confident that he’s fighting casually? Maybe he’s trying to make me complacent, and then he’ll finish me off. What if I try giving him a little strike…

“I’m not done with you yet! Don’t give in! I’m just—!”

I slashed my sword horizontally and repelled the scythe. It flew from his grasp and sailed through the air before landing tip first in the ground.

“Gaah!”

Lovis was flung back as well, rolling across the ground at an incredible speed, before crashing into the base of a tree with an impact that split the trunk. The tree creaked and leaned before it finally fell on top of him.

H-he can’t even be level 1,000!

Damia and Yozakura looked back and forth between Lovis and me, their faces ashen.

“Wh-what just happened…? I-is this *my* blood?!” Lovis panicked as he lay on the ground, trying to scoot away as I walked toward him.

“S-stay away! Space-Time Magic Level 7: Gravity!”

A large magic circle appeared, pushing down the ground around me as if it were under the weight of some massive object. I walked across the indentation without breaking my stride.

“Low-level spells won’t work,” I said.

“B-but this is a *level 7* spell! N-no way…there’s no item that can protect against that!” Lovis let out a high-pitched squeal as I approached.

I used Status Check…

LOVIS LORDGREY

Race: Human

Lv: 181
HP: 94/796
MP: 427/778

"Y-you're only level 181." I stammered.

He never stood a chance. With a name like The Black Reapers, I thought they would be dangerous. *Outlaw mercenaries* made them sound like hardened sellswords, but at that moment, I was getting more of an *office temp* vibe.

"D-did you just say 'o-only level 181'?" said Lovis, staring at me in disbelief. He let out a little shriek and cringed back further. Damia and Yozakura seized the moment to jump in front of him, cutting me off.

"Run, Lovis! We'll buy time!" shouted Damia.

"Stand down, you two! Don't do anything foolish!" shouted Lovis, hanging his head in shame. The other two jumped in surprise but stepped aside.

He must have realized that he was no match for me, but I wasn't about to turn my back on him. Maybe he was too proud to use his comrades as human shields, but then again, he might still have a trick up his sleeve.

Then he dropped to his knees and bowed his head in one smooth motion. "Forgive us, please. I'm begging you! Look, I'm on my knees!"

"I, uh…"

He was really hamming it up. Was this the same guy I'd just fought? I looked at his crew, thinking that one of them might try to pull something while I was distracted, but they looked as dumbfounded as I did. This sort of display might have been reasonable coming from an average person, but for a person who had just displayed such bravado, it was shocking.

"Listen, I am aware that I attacked you first and I said some incredibly arrogant things. If there is anything I—no, anything *we* can do to make up for it, we will! Please, please just let us live!" Lovis pressed his forehead into the ground, digging a shallow hole.

"B-boss, I thought better of you," said Damia, "This grovelin' is just… disgraceful."

"You once said you longed for death in battle," Yozakura added. "I don't blame you for surrendering. Discretion is the better part of valor, but this is just—"

"Silence!" shouted Lovis, spittle flying from his mouth as he struck the ground with his fists. "I said I would be happy if I died in an honorable fight to the death, not get squashed like a bug! Damia, Yozakura, listen to me. There are monsters in the world beyond your comprehension. I met someone like that ten years ago, and it was arrogance to think we were anything alike. When you pray to a god, do you doubt that you are below them? Now bow! Both of you, just like me!"

Damia and Yozakura looked at each other with uncertainty before sinking to their knees to bow to me as well.

Now this getting awkward…

“L-look, it’s no big deal. Just…get out of here already.” I said. I didn’t really feel like killing the first humans I met in Locklore, even if Lunaère had given me the impression that battles to the death weren’t that uncommon. I did sort of want to turn them in as criminals or something, but I had no idea where to find a town. I also didn’t want to get roped into any local drama before I knew what was going on. They might cause trouble if I let them go, but at their level, they’d be more annoying than dangerous.

I glanced over and saw that Yozakura had raised her head slightly. Lovis cleared his throat meaningfully, and she bowed again.

“Actually…there is something you could do for me,” I said, considering the situation I was in before we crossed paths.

“What might that be? Please, ask away!” replied Lovis, mumbling into the ground. I wished he would knock it off; it was weird talking to him like this.

“Could you, uh, show me the way to town?”

I figured that they should know the fastest way, and it would save me from wandering around aimlessly. Right now, they owed me big, and if they tried anything funny, I could make short work of them.

“Of course! A powerful warrior such as yourself must be unfamiliar with the area because you have come from far away! Please leave it to us—we will be your guides!” groveled Lovis.

So I found myself being led through the forest by my would-be attackers.

“If you would like to take a rest, just let me know! We’re at your service,” said Lovis.

“Th-thanks…”

Lovis gave an exaggerated nod with a forced smile plastered on his face. It was creepy.

“And should you desire, I would happily give you a massage,” he continued.

“Thanks, but I’ll take a pass…”

“I could carry you. Walking is so tedious. Why not leave it to me?!”

“I’m fine, really.”

Damia and Yozakura were staying a short distance away from us, muttering between themselves and looking very uncomfortable. Their opinion of their boss was taking a nosedive and I didn’t blame them.

“It makes so much more sense, knowing that you were summoned to this world. People like you are the stuff of legend! I have had the honor of meeting a few otherworldly travelers myself. They all have mighty powers and an amazing sense of generosity,” said Lovis.

“I guess we’re pretty common then?” I asked. That seemed to fit with what Naiarotop had said. I’m sure those people would seem like big shots compared to a guy like Lovis.

“After you defeated me so easily, I knew you must be one of them,” said Lovis, continuing to brownnose. It was useful information, but I wished he would lay off with the toady act.

“But, Boss, didn’t you say they were a bunch of pushovers who didn’t know their place? You even bragged about killing—”

“Silence, Damia! Open your mouth again, and I will sew it shut!” roared Lovis, spraying spit toward the magician.

Maybe I really should turn this rotten guy in…

“Ahem,” Lovis cleared his throat and regained his composure. “We wouldn’t expect a traveler to know anything about this area. Allow me to give you a map of the region,” he said as he handed me a roll of paper. Taking a quick look, it was nice to get a feel for how big the forest really was, but I still had no idea where we were.

“Ah, I’m sorry. We are currently in this area, heading this direction,” said Lovis, leaning uncomfortably close to point at a spot on the map.

It looked like we were near the edge of the forest, but it was still a long hike to the nearest town.

“Please, take this too. It is a magic compass. It will be accurate anywhere, regardless of how chaotic the underground magic veins are. I sincerely hope you will find it useful.” Lovis made a show of handing me what looked like a gold necklace with a compass on it.

“S-sir, isn’t that one of your favorite items?! Now we won’t be able to explore high-level dungeons! It’s not like we can just pick up a new one at the market…” said Yozakura in a panic.

“Haven’t I told you two to shut up?! Why can’t you understand that we need to focus on the *now* now? We can worry about later *later*!” Right after shouting at Yozakura, Lovis turned back to me. The creepy smile was plastered back on his face. “Please, Kanata, I would be honored if you accepted this.”

“Uh, sure, thanks…”

Was it really that valuable? Lovis was a real piece of work, but I felt a little bad for Damia and Yozakura.

Taking the Acacia Memoirs from my magic bag, I flipped through the pages.

GOLD MAGNET OF THE ADVENTURING KING

Value Rank: A

A compass with strong magical resistance due to the power of the specialized ore in the needle and the magic formulas carved into the case.

The user will never lose their way, even when exploring deep within high-level dungeons.

“A-rank, hmm…” I murmured. Lunaère had explained that items were divided into nine ranks: F, E, D, C, B, A, and S, followed by Legendary and lastly Godly.

A-rank was sort of powerful, I guessed. Then again, my standards might have been a little skewed, since Godly level items were a dime a dozen in Cocytus.

"It should be fine, if that's all it is," I murmured, unimpressed.

Lovis must have heard me, because he cringed. That was probably the wrong thing to say in front of the person who just gave me a gift.

"Thanks, I really appreciate it," I hastily added, tossing it into my magic bag.

"It pains me to see it treated so…casually. Ah, but no, think nothing of it." Lovis stared at my magic bag.

"Well, then," he continued, "It will be, ah, faster for you to travel to town of your own accord. We would *love* to accompany you, of course, but… we're not really welcome in town."

"Hmm…" He had a point. I could move much more quickly solo than I could dragging them along. Then again…

"Well, I still have more questions about Locklore. Would you mind staying with me a little while longer?"

"Oh," Lovis sagged visibly but quickly recovered. "Yes. Yes, of course! I would be honored!"

2

I LEANED UNDER A TREE watching the mercenaries fight a monster. Status Check revealed that the eagle-headed, lion-bodied beast was a level 200 griffon. I had been preparing to kill it myself when Lovis dragged his reluctant subordinates over to fight it.

"Feel free to rest while you wait. We will vanquish it for you," he shouted as they entered battle. Perhaps he felt bad for attacking me.

Maybe he shouldn't be randomly attacking travelers if his feelings are that easily hurt, I thought. And he's still pretty banged up from our battle. Should he really be fighting again?

"Ca-caw!" screeched the griffon. It had been flying nearby and dove to attack Lovis.

"Space-Time Magic Level 4: Short Gate."

Lovis evaded the attack. The other end of his teleport was directly above the griffon, and he lashed out with his scythe to slice one of its wings cleanly off. The griffon lost control and crashed into the ground, where it quickly righted itself and glared at Lovis.

"Earth Magic Level 4: Clod Missile."

Damia attacked with a flying clump of earth while the griffon was still distracted. It sailed through the air and exploded in front of the beast, pelting it with stones. It seemed like a good tactic—Lovis kept the monster's attention, while Damia hit it from range.

While those two fought, Yozakura stood with a hand on her scabbard and her eyes closed.

"Spirit Magic Level 4: Zephyr's Wing. Spirit Magic Level 5: Ogre's Strike."

A light surrounded her body.

Spirit magic borrowed magical power from the local spirits of nature rather than channeling the caster's own magic energy. By relying on those spirits, it reduced the amount of magic power consumption and a caster could use higher-level spells than their skill level would normally allow.

Lunaère wasn't a fan, saying that spirit magic was difficult to control and unstable. While she taught me some of the basics, most of her instruction was focused on how to deal with an opponent that used spirit magic rather than using it myself. Spirit magic tended to focus heavily on buffs and other support spells, but it had a few attack spells.

From the look of it, Yozakura had just increased her speed and strength, and she now stood ready. Lovis teleported away from the griffon and fell back to Yozakura's side.

"I'll let you finish it off. Short Gate," he said, holding his hand up to Yozakura. In one instant, she winked out of existence and appeared again behind the griffon. Sliding her katana from its sheath and opening her eyes

at the same time, she lopped off the griffon's head with a single strike. The head fell to the ground, and the body collapsed behind it.

Well, that settled that. I had been a little worried because the griffon was a higher level than the gang, but they managed to successfully finish it off. They also appeared to be no worse for the wear. They worked well as a team, and it looked like they had done this sort of thing before. Seeing them like that, I actually respected them a little.

"Sorry for the wait. Normally, I would handle such things my own, but…I'm not quite at full strength right now, so I required their assistance. Shall we continue on?" said Lovis with his unsettling smile, rubbing his hands together while trying to gauge my mood.

"Sure…"

I take it back—this guy is the worst.

"I can't take it… This ain't the Boss I admired, the Boss I followed…" said Damia, hanging his head in dejection.

"I don't understand why he's acting so cowardly either. I thought he was more of a free spirit," said Yozakura, staring at Lovis with disappointment in her eyes.

"W-what's not to understand? I'm no coward, but I'm also no fool. Some people are just our *betters*, and we must treat them as such. If you can't wrap your heads around that fact, then you two are irredeemably ignorant," said Lovis, desperation creeping into his voice.

"Out of a sense of duty, I'll stay with the party until we get to town. But when we get there, I'm done with the Reapers," said Yozakura.

"Well…I won't stop you. There is something we should be clear about, though. More than anyone, Yozakura, you should know that leaving the Black Reapers is a death sentence. I hope you enjoy a life spent trembling at the sight of our shadows," replied Lovis.

"I think the whole crew needs to have a chat about your behavior. Damia and I are disappointed in you, but what will *they* think?"

"Hey, hang on! Calm down!" cried Damia, trying to make peace as Lovis and Yozakura bickered.

"Excuse me, Kanata, but may I have a few moments? I need to talk this over with Yozakura." said Lovis.

"Whatever…" I replied.

"Truly, you are too gracious!" Lovis bowed multiple times, then quickly turned to face the swordswoman again. "Yozakura, I am reminded of something from six years ago. It was the incident which led you to join the Black Reapers."

"An appeal to nostalgia won't work, Sir."

"Ah…but…Damia. Damia, you explain it to her!"

"M-me? But I…"

Their pointless argument continued for another five minutes. Eventually, Lovis seemed to run out of steam, and Yozakura softened a little.

“Fine, you can continue doubting me, Yozakura. My actions may look pathetic, but I assure I have good reason. I would just ask that we set this aside for now,” said Lovis.

“…Well, if you’ll admit that much, I guess I can we can talk about this later,” she conceded.

It seemed to be the end of their conversation, or at least I hoped. After listening to them talk, it occurred to me that Lovis might be a better con man than a mercenary.

“As long as you continue selling your sword, you will one day understand. I value your companionship, and I don’t want to lose you over a…*small* misunderstanding like this,” he said diplomatically.

“Fine…but if you keep acting like a sniveling rat, I will leave the Black Reapers—consequences be damned. For now, I will forget this ever happ—” said Yozakura.

“Please forgive us, Kanata!” Lovis interrupted, wheeling back to me with an obsequious smile. “It will only be another moment—just *one more* moment. We will be finished very soon! Thank you for your unending patience and understanding!”

Lovis bowed many times. I nodded slightly, and he looked relieved. Turning quickly back to Yozakura, he said through clenched teeth, “Sorry, were you trying to say something to me?”

“I am leaving after all.”

“B-but why?!” Lovis punched his own thigh in frustration.

I didn’t see this ending any time soon, so I decided to get comfortable. I yawned and looked around at nothing. Then something in the forest caught my eye…

Hang on, is that…!

It was a goblin. Ugly green skin, about the height of a child, bad teeth—you know, a goblin. It looked incredibly weak, but I remembered a certain creature inside the Cursed Mirror that looked exactly the same. Aforementioned, it might have looked like a weak little goblin, but when its prey let its guard down, it split open and consumed its victim whole.

Impossible. Could it have slipped out of the Cursed Mirror while I was carrying it? Maybe I hadn’t been handling it properly. Releasing a level 3,000 demon into the Enchanted Forest would devastate the local ecosystem.

Can’t fool me twice, demon!

“Lovis! Take these two and use Short Gate to get away! Now!”

Lovis turned around upon hearing my words. Seeing the monster, his face screwed up in confusion.

“Kanata…? I only see a goblin. They’re all over forest. Normally, the more powerful monsters eat them…” he said.

Maybe he was deceived by the demon’s appearance because he didn’t seem like he was in a hurry to flee. That limited my options—I needed a spell that was both powerful enough to kill the demon instantly and accurate enough to limit collateral damage.

“I’ll take care of it!” I shouted, leveling my sword at the demon. “Space-Time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb!”

The shimmering darkness appeared, centered on the fake goblin.

“Level 19?! B-but even the highest spells that high elves and dragons can cast is level 15…” whimpered Lovis in shock.

“Gwah?” The fake goblin gasped in surprise. It wriggled its arms and legs desperately as the black light surrounded and lifted it from the ground. A second later, the spreading darkness collapsed, and the spell imploded.

There was a loud boom. Dirt and undergrowth were sucked into the singularity. Trees were uprooted and dragged sideways. Along with the forest debris, the demon was squished to an infinitesimal point.

Then the spell exploded, sending demon blood and flesh showering down on the surrounding bare earth. The mercenaries were knocked off their feet by the blast and sent rolling across the gore-covered ground.

Hmm…

A fake-goblin demon wouldn’t have died that easily, and they didn’t leave such normal-looking gore behind. Apparently, Lovis was right, it was just a local monster.

“Sorry, I went a bit overboard. It looked like a demon I’ve killed before” I said, turning back to Lovis and the others. He was breathing raggedly, his hands on the ground as he tried to get up.

“This is exactly what I was talking about, Yozakura. It is not a matter of cowardice or pride. Trying to fight a beast like this would be like fighting an avalanche. I have no fear of dying with honor, but I’m not interested in a pointless death!” he said.

“I-I am so sorry, Sir. I was wrong,” said Yozakura.

At least they had come to an understanding.

After traveling with the mercenaries for a day, we finally reached the forest’s edge. The levels of the monsters we encountered continued to drop as we walked. Level 150 creatures near the entrance to Cocytus were replaced by level 40 at the edge of the woods, then level 20 in the fields and surrounding countryside.

“There,” said Lovis in a tired voice, “You can finally see it. That’s the city of Arroburg,” I made out a large town, surrounded by a high wall to keep monsters out.

The thought of sleeping in civilized lodgings was a welcome change. I had gotten so used to living in dangerous environments that a real bed sounded decadent.

But then I remembered I didn’t have any money.

“If I sell the Gold Magnet, I might be able to drum up a bit of cash,” I muttered to myself, thinking out loud. Then I saw Lovis was looking at me with dead eyes. “Ah, sorry! It’s just that I don’t have any money. I don’t really know how I’ll manage in town…”

I smiled awkwardly and scratched my head. I thought about returning the Gold Magnet as a peace offering. Lovis seemed to treasure the item, but if I tried to give it back to him, he’d probably just panic and make me keep it. I decided to hold onto it—it would honor his feelings, and it might actually come in handy.

“M-money? Money! Y-you two, do you have any money on you?!” cried Lovis, his face pale as he turned to his underlings.

“Yeah, I got a little, Boss…”

“I don’t walk around with more than I need, but I do have a few coins…”

Damia fumbled through his magic bag and pulled out a slightly smaller pouch.

Lovis’s eyebrows shot up, and he smacked the pouch of out of Damia’s outstretched hand. Coins scattered across the ground.

“Don’t you understand what it means to be asked for money when you’re about to part ways?! It’s the price of your own lives!”

The blood drained from Damia’s face, and he started trembling. Yozakura also looked shocked and dropped her magic bag on the ground at my feet.

“L-look, this isn’t a robbery or anything!” I said, “It’s fine! Besides, there’s got to be a way for me to earn money in town. I’d just like to know if there’s any particular laws or regulations that I need to be aware of.”

"*Earn* money? Well…would you want an, uh, honest living?" asked Lovis.

I stared at him in silence. His face went pale, and he started waving his hands.

"Pretend I didn't ask! It's just that it can be difficult for someone with no proof of identity to legitimately earn money. Official places of employment will only accept people with identification documents. So that only leaves places that offer *illicit* services—under-the-table jobs—that sort of thing. I don't know of many other options…"

"Hmm, I'd really prefer something legal."

"Uh, certainly. Well, then…" Lovis thought for a long time, hand on his chin. Apparently, this was going to be tougher than I expected.

"What about the Adventurers' Guild?" chimed in Yozakura, and Lovis's head snapped up.

"What are you thinking?! You can't expect Kanata to work at such a low-level place. Could you even imagine it?! An absolute beast like this gathering medicinal herbs and running errands for the Guild?!"

I-it's not like I'm a total monster…

"S-sorry, Sir! You're absolutely right." Yozakura bowed to Lovis.

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to! Please excuse her insolence, Kanata. Yozakura isn't from this country. She doesn't understand how things really—"

"Uh, it's fine…" I cut him off. "Actually, tell me more about this Adventurers' Guild."

It might be an easy place for me to earn some quick cash. The concept was nearly universal in Japanese RPGs and light novels. If the gods had made Locklore using them as a guide, I might just be in luck.

"The Adventurers' Guild is an organization established in accordance with the king's mandate and organized by the head of the town or region. As long as you're not a registered criminal, you can accept paid job requests submitted by the local lord or magistrate, the Guild itself, or the people. Requests range from thinning out monster populations to carrying luggage. Depending on what you collect, the Guild also serves as a market to sell your items or monster parts," explained Lovis.

I liked the sound of that. I wasn't sure how far I could get with monster hunting at my current level. I thought I'd be fine…probably. At the very least, I was stronger than the outlaw mercenaries. I wondered what the catch was.

"The Guild takes a cut of everything," continued Lovis. "And you can only accept jobs that are basically chores until you build up your reputation with them. The local ruler, Lord Grand, also has a reputation for being cheap and ineffective. I think it would be a waste of your time—"

"I can deal with all that, especially since it's the only legal option. I'll join the Guild and try to find some work," I said. I was actually relieved to

hear they had chore-level jobs available. I could probably handle those with no problem at all.

"Uh… At *your* level?" asked Lovis, a look of confusion on his face. I got the impression he hadn't checked my stats, but he surely had gotten a feel for them when we fought.

"Is it too low?" I asked, pensively. Aw, dang. And I thought I'd be in a pretty good position…

Lovis looked uncertain of what to say for a moment, but then a smile burst across his face. "No, you'll be fine! You just need the registration fee, so I will give you some money." He fished into his magic pouch and counted out a handful of coins. "It's not a lot, but it should pay for the fee and a few days of room and board."

He handed me the coins in a small pouch, and Damia very hesitantly touched his shoulder to get his attention.

"Boss, are you sure about this? If he joins the Guild…things will end up, ah, complicated…" he whispered.

"It's not my problem, and I've told him no lies. He shouldn't get angry at us. Anyway, we need to leave as quickly as possible," Lovis whispered back.

I couldn't tell what they were saying, but I was anxious to get into town.

"Lovis?" I asked, and he jumped in surprise.

"Ah, sorry! T-to be honest, Kanata, we're not very well liked by the lord here, you see. We can't go near the city gates. I hate to leave you, but if you wouldn't mind… You understand, right?"

"I do. Thanks for everything. I'll take care of myself from here on out," I said.

"Gracious as ever! Then we shall take our leave! Fate willing, we shall meet again."

Lovis slowly backed away from me, then turned and pushed his underlings' backs.

"Run, you fools! Run so that we never cross his path again!" he hissed at them as they jogged away.

The three of them seemed on better terms with each other as they disappeared into the countryside.

3

As I approached Arroburg, I walked past a group of people in black robes. They were carving and embedding magic formulas into the city walls. I wondered if some sort of a magical barrier was built into the masonry, making it difficult for monsters to come near.

I finally came to the main gate, where a man with a cart was arguing with a couple of town guards about putting up a stall without the proper license. I entered and saw that the town was made up of narrow streets, crowded with buildings. It felt even busier than my hometown back in Japan. There were lots of people packed behind the safety of the city walls.

It was hard to walk without bumping into anyone. I wandered the streets searching for the Adventurers' Guild, but I couldn't seem to find it.

"…Ah!"

While I was looking another direction, a large man cut sideways across the street on a collision course. I turned to take the hit with my shoulder, bending backward to reduce the impact. He obviously hadn't been paying attention to the people around him, but I decided that an apology would be the best way to smooth things over and get on with my search.

"Sorry, I was trying to find—" I began to explain with a bow of my head, but he grabbed my shoulder.

"You've got some nerve, punk. Think you can run into me and get off with a pathetic bow?"

I lifted my head and looked at the man's face. He was a burly guy in his late forties, over two meters tall with a huge scar on his rugged face.

Behind him was a short smarmy-looking fellow.

"Wha'd he do, Octavio?" the little man asked.

"This little snot bumped into me and then tried to run off. That hurt, boy."

We didn't hit each other that hard…

"That's a nice robe you got there. And would you look at that magic bag. Daddy buy them for you? Brats like you who've never seen a day's work really piss me off. Makes me mad enough to kill, y'know?" said Octavio with a menacing grin.

I finally got it. This was a shakedown. Octavio ran into me intentionally, and now the other people in the area were walking around us, acting like they didn't see anything. This wasn't the way I wanted to start a new life in Locklore. I suddenly started wondering what would happen if it came down to a fight. Octavio was huge and muscular, but there was a chance that he wasn't much stronger than Lovis.

I quickly put that thought away and decided to try to avoid a fight. I didn't know anything about this world, let alone this city. If this turned into a big deal, it might ruin my chances to live and work here. Maybe I could just bribe him and avoid any more trouble.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have much on me, but would money buy some forgiveness?” I asked.

“I like a guy who knows what’s what, but…” Octavio said, sizing me up. “Tell you what, give me the magic bag on your hip with everything inside and we’re square. I’ve always wanted one of them.”

I felt my expression stiffen. The truly dangerous items like the Cursed Mirror were in a dimensional pocket, but I kept things like potions and the Acacia Memoirs in the bag for easy access. More importantly, the magic bag contained things I’d received from Lunaère. I wasn’t about to hand over the things she gave me—along with the memories—to this guy.

Maybe I should just run…

I took a step back and was about to use Status Check on Octavio when I heard a girl’s voice shout.

“G-guards! Th-there’s a fight! Somebody’s been stabbed!”

The crowd around us murmured and shuffled when they heard the news.

“What, a stabbing?! Where?! Who’s the attacker?!”

I saw two guards quickly jogging down the street in our direction—the same two who had closed down the stall. Then I realized the girl had been shouting about Octavio and me. The bit about a stabbing was just to put a little hustle in their step.

“O-Octavio,” the small man said nervously, “things’ll get bad if this turns into a scene! Wasn’t they threatening to kick you outta the Guild next time you caused problems?”

“If I find that snitch, I’ll kill ’em!” Octavio ground his teeth and glared at the approaching guards with beady eyes. “You got lucky, brat, but this ain’t over!”

“Don’chu worry, Octavio. I know that voice—it was that white mage, Pomera,” said the small man, grinning as he looked back at the crowd.

Octavio swung his right arm and slugged me in the shoulder, then started running away.

I looked at my shoulder. Did he pull his punch? That didn’t hurt at all. But as he ran, I noticed that Octavio was carrying an incredible-looking axe. He was clearly someone who made a living hunting monsters. Perhaps he was even an adventurer.

He was also prepared to start a fight with me, and surely that meant his level was high enough that he felt comfortable picking fights with strangers. Before he disappeared from sight, I used Status Check to see what I was up against.

OCTAVIO AUGRAIN
Race: Human
Lv: 28
HP: 112/129
MP: 106/106

I blinked.

That can't be right. Maybe I focused on a random person from the crowd instead.

No, it checked out. It was ridiculous; even Lovis was stronger.

Even *Lovis*. My assessment of that guy kept changing.

Maybe he was just a lumberjack with a bad attitude, but if I hadn't done the Status Check myself, I would have never imagined that Octavio was only level 28. I resolved to start secretly checking more people's statuses to try to get a better grasp of the average level around here.

"Hey, are you the guy who got stabbed? I don't see any blood on you," said one of the approaching guards. He seemed annoyed that I wasn't injured.

"I think maybe there's been a mistake. But thank you for coming—it really helped," I said.

"Tsk! We let a person with an illegal stall get away for this!" the other guard complained before they both glared at me and walked away.

Arroburg did not seem to be a city of kind souls. My mind turned to the memory of Lunaère, surrounded by magic books as she gave me a lesson in the fundamentals while Noble watched and added running commentary.

"I miss Cocytus." I sighed.

I saw a frail girl looking at me anxiously as the crowd thinned. She wore a blue beret pulled low on her head and had somewhat short, wavy blonde hair poking out from below. She hugged a large staff to her side.

She must have been the one who'd helped me. When we made eye contact, she jumped and ran away.

4

AFTER I'D AVOIDED A FIGHT with Octavio, I still couldn't find the Adventurers' Guild. Nobody seemed to be able to give me clear directions.

I did see more of the robed figures while I searched, all busy carving magic formulas into the city walls. The project must have been larger than I'd initially thought. They seemed to be coordinating with the town guard, so I assumed that was no reason for suspicion.

Turning down yet another street in search of the Guild, I felt a timid poke in my back. I turned to find the blonde staff-wielding girl standing right behind me. She gazed at me hesitantly.

"Um… A-are you looking for the Adventurers' Guild, by any chance?" she asked from beneath her beret. Her shoulders quivered when our eyes met, and she looked away. I was caught off guard by being accosted by such a slight girl, and after a moment of silence, she started backing away while shaking her head.

"I-I'm sorry I poked my nose into your business" she said. She seemed skittish, and I wondered how often she actually talked to strangers.

"I would be grateful if you could show me where the Guild is. You're the one who called the guards for me. Thank you, Miss…?"

"P-Pomera. I'm sorry, it's my fault you got roped in with the guards…"

Pomera…those guys mentioned her earlier. "No, no, you really helped. Thank you! Have you…been following me since then?"

I'd been walking mostly at random, wandering around the streets. There was no way we could have just coincidently bumped back into one another.

"A-actually, I was trying to decide if I should talk to you before that too. I-I ended up just following you around…"

Oh, really? Given my experience so far in Arroburg, that seemed a little suspect. She might look sweet, but maybe she was after the robe that Lunaère made for me, or my magic bag, or the Sorcerer King's Research.

"Okay, but…was there a reason you were following me?" I asked.

"Um, it's only… Y-you seemed to be lost for so long. I'm sorry, I-I should have said something sooner. I'm just not very good at talking to people."

Maybe she's a good person after all, just shy.

I felt a little embarrassed that I'd suspected otherwise. She'd been watching this whole time, waiting for the right time to talk to me. If I were that nervous about talking to strangers, I would probably have given up right away.

Having awkwardly broken the ice, Pomera led the way to the Adventurers' Guild.

"S-so, you came here alone, Kanata?" she asked.

"Yeah, well…you could say I'm on a journey."

"I-if that's the case…the things you can do will be really limited. Lately, a lot of low-level adventurers have been killed, so they've made the requirements harsher. It's not often that a single adventurer can even take an F-rank job here in Arroburg."

"Oh, really…?"

My shoulders slumped in disappointment. It looked like I'd be taking on menial chores until I could find people to team up with.

"I w-would let you join my group, but…I don't think that would go very well." Pomera turned her face away, looking sad. I got the impression she wasn't a decision maker.

After walking a little while, we came to a large building with a crest over the door bearing one red and one white sword. The people there had a rough sort of look about them, like they were fighters. I'd finally reached the Guild.

We went in together, and Pomera looked around nervously before letting out a sigh of relief.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"N-nothing. Only, well…I was supposed to meet with my party members, and I'm a little late. It looks like I'm the first one here, so I feel a bit relieved."

"You're late? Is it my fault because you had to rescue me?"

"No no no! It's my fault, I-I'm the one who reached out to you anyway! Besides, the others usually meet up somewhere else and then come to the Guild…and they're usually late."

It sounded like they were excluding her. Pomera shook her head vigorously, perhaps guessing what I was thinking from my expression.

"I-it's okay! They're really nice to me despite everything. They're good people," she insisted.

If she said so, but it wasn't my business anyway. Having an outsider step in rarely helps when there are problems in a group—but her tone left me feeling uncomfortable.

Pomera said she was going to wait for her companions by the entrance, so I turned to walk to the reception desk by myself. She stopped me just before I left.

"K-Kanata…be careful, please. That man you were fighting with, Octavio, he's a D-rank adventurer. He's received penalties from the Guild for violent incidents quite a few times," said Pomera.

So he really is an adventurer…

If the lowest rank was F, then Octavio was three whole ranks up the ladder at only level 28. That didn't seem like a functional system to me. Then again, I was beginning to doubt Lunaère's claim that I wouldn't be safe outside the dungeon unless I was level 4,000.

"Th-there are rumors that he's lashing out now because he failed to get promoted to C-rank. It's probably

a good idea to change your clothes and c-cover your face with a cloak," continued Pomera.

"Huh. Thanks for letting me know…"

It would be a real pain if I ended up in an altercation with him, because I didn't want to cause any trouble. At the same time, I also had zero desire to take off the robe and jewelry that Lunaère had given me just to hide from a bully like Octavio.

"Pomera-san, thank you for everything." I said with a bow. "You were a really big help when I needed it. I promise I'll pay you back someday." But she stood there blinking in confusion.

"…Pomera?"

"S-orry! Nobody's ever sincerely thanked me before! I-I don't really know what to say… Sorry!"

I had a sinking feeling.

5

"WEIRD..." I muttered while I waited in the line at the reception desk. I had been discretely checking the status of people around me, and the results were puzzling.

Of the twenty people I checked, everyone was between level 5 and 30. It was making me reconsider my

reaction to Lovis for being level 181. Even Octavio's level 28 seemed above average.

No wonder Lovis was such an arrogant jerk. In most situations, he actually had the power to back up his attitude. Then I started to sweat as another uncomfortable thought struck me. If people here found out I was level 4,122, they'd treat me like some sort of monster. They might even try to drive me away.

Did Lunaère lie to me? Or maybe she'd been closed away in Cocytus for so long that her ideas about reasonable levels were completely skewed. She said there were powerful people in Locklore and that they would definitely notice me—so maybe she was just trying to err on the side of caution.

But seriously, this level gap seemed extreme.

"Huh…?" A poster caught my eye.

On the Guild's wall was a wanted poster with a familiar face on it. It said, "Lovis of the Black Reapers," and below that, "Bounty: 80 million gold." Could there be that much of a difference between one Locklorian gold and one Japanese yen?

That's absurd. There's no way that guy has an 80 million yen bounty on his head.

"Scary, huh? He's been sighted in the area, so there are wanted posters up everywhere," came a voice from behind. I turned to see a slender young man around my age with a bow and arrows on his back.

"Uh, what kind of person is he?" I asked, feigning ignorance. "I don't know too much about him…"

"Oh, wow. You've never heard of Lovis? He recruits adventurers who get rejected by the guild. They take jobs like assassinations or interfering with trade. That dude's bad news. There're even rumors he's taking deals on the sly from multiple lords. He's not bad-looking, though. And he takes down a lot of other criminals because he's just a thug who's obsessed with fighting. Some people are out there cheering for him like he's a folk hero. He's got this dark charisma, y'know?"

"Dark charisma…" I remembered Lovis's creepy, obsequious smile. Dark…*charisma*? That didn't seem right. Maybe the person I met was a fake using Lovis's name? But there was no mistaking the face on the poster.

I noticed another bright red wanted poster next to it. This poster had a drawing of a narrow-eyed young man in a robe, but oddly, it didn't have a

bounty written on it. All it said was “Evil Priest Notts.” I wondered if its placement by Lovis’s poster meant that there had been sightings of him as well.

“So what’s the deal with that one?” I asked the guy behind me.

“You haven’t heard of humanoid dragons either? Dude. They’re humans that are also like…dragons. They’re basically walking disasters. No bounty because there’s no way a human could do anything about them. If a monster like that was in the city, I’d just run,” he explained.

Okay, now that sounds like some serious danger.

“Anyway, I think the warning about Notts is a hoax,” he continued with a smile. “There were a bunch of posters in other buildings, but yesterday, I saw guards taking them down. It’s just a bunch of gossip. We don’t even know if the guy’s alive or dead.”

Finally, my number was called at the reception desk. I managed to join the guild without a problem using the money I got from Lovis. They gave me a registration book with some basic information in it, but…there were no decent jobs available for me. It was just a bunch of low-paying chores and busywork.

They ranged from finding lost familiars to researching low-level summoning magic. The jobs were so petty that I wondered why the requesters couldn’t just do them. Technically, there were some F-rank jobs that involved gathering medicinal herbs in the forest or hunting goblins, but I wasn’t allowed to take those.

“I was just hoping for something with a bit more fighting,” I said to the receptionist.

“Ah…it’s a formality, but we cannot allow F-rank adventurers to accept any jobs involving monsters unless they are in a party of two or more,” said the receptionist in a tone that implied they said that a lot. It looked like I’d be hauling luggage or helping with summoning research until I found some party members. I was about to take a chore from the list when I heard an angry voice coming from the front door.

“Hey, Pomera! Where the hell have you been? You screwing with us?”

“B-but you just arrived…!”

“Are you stupid? You were a no-show, so we went shopping. I guess that’s what we get for letting a piece of hot garbage like you into the group!”

Pomera cringed as a blue-haired man yelled at her. Another woman standing close by yawned like she was bored with the situation. These must be the party members who Pomera mentioned. She had insisted her companions were good people, but it didn’t look that way to me. In fact, they seemed pretty lousy for berating her for waiting while they’d been off at the store.

“I’ll, uh, go to the back of the line,” I said to the receptionist while bowing. I grabbed my registration booklet and went over to Pomera. It was my fault she was late, and I wasn’t about to leave her hanging.

“Your pathetic white magic isn’t even good for anything. The only thing you have going for you is that you don’t talk back, but if you can’t even be on time, then you’re worthless! Do you understand what I’m saying?”

The blue-haired man leaned in close to Pomera, invading her space. Her mouth opened and closed, but she wasn’t making any sound.

“Come on, use your words! Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I stepped between the two, separating them.

“She’s late because she helped me when I was lost. If that’s why you’re angry, then I’ll apologize. Though you seem too angry for that to be the only problem, so I wonder what else is going on here,” I said.

“K-Kanata?” said Pomera, shocked.

“Huh?” The blue-haired man stared at me in annoyance. He snorted and then looked back at Pomera. “So you went out of your way to help this guy? I guess you half-breeds try to cozy up to any human you can find.”

“Half-breed…?” I asked.

“Oh, you didn’t know? Well, have a look, then.” The man grinned cruelly and grabbed Pomera’s beret.

“No! S-stop, Roy, please!” Pomera cried and tried to resist, but Roy pushed her down as he stole her hat. I quickly moved behind her and stopped her fall.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“…What the? Did you just teleport?” Roy looked at me with narrowed eyes before rubbing them with the back of his hand. “Whatever. Get a look at her ears—half-human and half-forest bogey.”

Pomera’s face was pale as she pressed her hands to her head, trying to hide something. Underneath, I could see pointed ears.

“An elf? No…a half-elf.” I said quietly. Lunaère had told me about them, but this was the first time I’d seen one for myself.

I could probably guess why Roy had called them *forest bogeys*. Elves were a race of long-eared people who excelled at magic and summoned the power of the spirits to hold off old age and injury. The high elves lived on a floating continent in the sky, but the ones born and raised in the forests on the surface were just called elves. Lunaère said the high elves could live almost a thousand years with the help of the spirits in the sky, while the forest elves lived closer to five hundred. A half-elf in a city might live around two hundred years.

Elves preferred nature and hated expanding cities, so they often clashed with humans. Knowing there was a history of conflict, I wasn’t surprised that there was some lasting bad blood.

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to mislead you, Kanata, I just…wanted to be friends.” Tears welled in Pomera’s eyes. I thought she was oddly timid, but now I understood why—she wasn’t welcome in either human or elven society.

“You get it, right? You gotta keep these half-breeds on a short leash. I’m a nice guy just for letting her join our party, right?” Roy pushed his face close to mine. This guy really pissed me off. “Unless you’re some kind of moron, you should just go back to minding your own business.”

“Yeah, I understand… I understand that talking to you is pointless,” I said.

This conversation was going nowhere. I didn’t know too much about the details of human-elf diplomacy, but I was so annoyed that I didn’t care.

“Pomera-san, would you form a party with me? I need someone to show me the ropes around here, and I can’t take any decent jobs by myself,” I said. Then I held my hand out to Pomera for a shake.

“H-huh—but I’m a half-elf… Are you sure? And I don’t know if I’ll be of any use…”

Roy glared at me before turning to Pomera. “Hey, you’re not in charge here! I can’t afford to lose any cheap labor!”

“This is Pomera-san’s decision. Your profits don’t matter,” I said.

Pomera looked uncertain at first but eventually made up her mind. Trembling, she reached out and gently shook my hand.

“I-I would be happy to join you, Kanata! I’m not much use, but I’ll do my best!”

As Pomera and I turned to walk back to the reception desk, Roy grabbed my shoulder. He leaned in and whispered in my ear, “Listen, Kantata or whatever, you don’t need to pretend to be a nice guy. I get it. I thought a half-breed forest bogey would be good at magic too—but her level is low, she’s clumsy, and she’s good for nothing. Well, maybe good for blowing off a little steam… You should just give her—”

I gave Roy a light shove to get him away from me, and the force sent him tumbling to the ground.

“You’re pathetic,” I said.

Halfway to the reception desk, Pomera stopped and glanced back over her shoulder.

“You shouldn’t waste any more energy on that guy,” I told her gently.

“I-it’s just… He’s acting weird.”

I looked back to see that Roy was writhing on the floor with wide eyes and drooling as he begged for help from his other party member.

“G-gods, it hurts! Help me, Holly! My shoulder’s dislocated!”

It looked like the level gap was going to be a bigger issue than I’d hoped.

6

WE FILED the necessary paperwork with the Guild to establish that Pomera and I were a party. Now we could take requests that involved fighting monsters, and I wouldn't have to deal with doing chores or fetch quests.

The first job we took wasn't the most exciting, but it seemed appropriate for a newly registered party. We were supposed to try to thin out the swarms of level 7 goblins around the outskirts of Arroburg. It wouldn't even be a challenge, but there was no other way to increase my rank in the guild. And without raising my rank, I wouldn't have access to higher-level requests. Those were the rules, so we went goblin hunting.

"Um… A-are you really sure you want me in your party?" Pomera asked hesitantly after we accepted the job.

I understood why she was so shy, considering how poorly Roy and his gang had treated her. Still, her lack of confidence was making me uncomfortable.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you," I said. "You're the only person in town I know, even if I've known you less than a day. I feel I can trust you."

Pomera's face turned red as she fidgeted with her beret.

"I-I'm really happy because I wanted to be friends with you too…a-and you don't treat me any different now that you know I'm a half-elf. Roy and Holly treated me a little bad sometimes, so I'm really grateful you invited me to join your party. I-I just don't want to be a burden."

"…A little bad sometimes?" I said without thinking. That seemed like a serious understatement.

"Th-they were really nice in the past! They knew people in the Guild were avoiding me because I'm mixed race. They were the only ones who smiled when they talked to me. I j-just couldn't live up to their expectations because I'm worthless…" Her shoulders slumped in disappointment. "Maybe if I… If I could just do b-better, then I'd be able to be friends with Roy and Holly…"

I wanted to raise her spirits, but I didn't know what to say. Even if Pomera had the magic power that Roy was hoping for, I doubt it would have changed their group dynamic. I remembered Roy's coarse words about Pomera—they were shameful. She should forget about those two jerks. No matter how you looked at it, Roy was a turd. I didn't think much of Holly either, since she'd just stood there and let Roy abuse Pomera.

"I-I'm low-level compared to Roy, but I can use white magic up to level 3! Mom taught me that much…while she was still alive. So you can let me take care of healing!"

Even though white magic was my weakest area, I could use up to level 4 spells. I kept that to myself. So far, I'd managed healing with

Lunaère's elixirs and the Ouroboros Wheel. As for experience levels, I'd already checked. Roy was level 14 and Pomera was level 7. While to them, Roy might seem twice as strong as Pomera, to me, they were about the same.

"I'm g-going to try my best to make sure I don't let you down! I promise I'll be useful!" said Pomera loudly as she squeezed her fists. She realized how loud she was talking when she noticed other people looking in her direction. Again, she turned red and pulled her beret down as if she was trying to hide inside it.

If Pomera found out I was above level 4,000, she'd probably think I only invited her to join me out of pity. In reality, I needed a party member to take better jobs, and having someone around who knew about adventuring and the city was a huge help. But I wondered if she could deal with knowing the truth or if she'd just leave the party thinking that she was a burden. If she left, I had a feeling that things would go poorly for her. Still, I frowned as I considered that roping her into my weird situation might cause her a lot of trouble.

"I'm s-sorry, Kanata! I'm embarrassing you…" Pomera said with a few small bows. She must have seen my hardened expression and assumed it was because she was being loud.

I smiled, which seemed to calm her, but I still worried about what I should do.

We passed by a short man as we left the Guild. Seeing Pomera with me, he grinned widely. It was that D-rank Octavio's toady, so I hurried Pomera along at a quick pace. As we withdrew, I asked Pomera where we might find a store to pick up a few adventuring essentials.

"I recommend this general store," she said, pointing to a sign. "They have a wide selection—waterskins, knives, recovery items, and even dry branches for torches. I have a sewing kit, so don't worry about that. My sewing is… It's the only thing Holly ever complimented me on."

When she said she had a sewing kit, it took a moment for me to realize why that would be useful. Then it dawned on me that clothing got damaged while fighting monsters. Being able to repair your gear outside of town must be really helpful.

"I have a few recovery items already. I also have a waterskin, and I'm good with fire magic, so I don't think we'll need anything expensive," I said, lifting my magic bag and patting it.

"Y-you have a magic bag. I did think you looked well dressed… N-now I feel a little silly." Pomera shrunk, squeezing her shoulders in. "Y-you don't have to take my word for it, but Roy and Holly come to this shop often. Really, it's good! If you rely on magic, you might end up running out when you need it most. It's best to get in the habit of buying extra potions when you can!"

I hated to hear Roy's name come up, but she didn't seem to resent him at all. It was strange that she'd suggest this place, since it obviously

brought back bad memories. Maybe she cared more about trying to be helpful than about dwelling on how roughly they treated her.

"To be honest, I don't think we need to be that worried," I said.

"Is it about money? If so, I can pay… Y-you probably won't even use it anyway…"

"No, I'll pay! I got a little money from someone I met while traveling, so I'm okay. Or I think I am, anyway…"

"Y-you don't have to be that generous!" said Pomera. "It's okay… When I was in Roy and Holly's party, they'd have me pay for small stuff all the time."

Those rats!

"I'll pay!" I insisted. "You just tell me what we need."

We kept going back and forth for a while. Pomera was so eager to seem useful that we agreed to split the costs. With our shopping taken care of, we headed toward the city gates to go goblin hunting.

"I don't think Roy-san and Holly-san are very good people," I said hesitantly as we walked along. "I'm…sorry if it hurts to talk about it, but aren't you angry at them at all?"

"I think there are some things that can't be helped."

"Can't be helped…?"

"The elves that lived in the nearby forest used to attack Arroburg a lot," she said. "My dad was a human from this town, and my mom was an elf. She used to hate humans a long time ago, but…as my mom and dad grew closer, the leader of the elves tried to make the other elves in the village resent her like they resented humans. In the end, they chased her from the forest."

"Why would the leader do that?"

"Elves lose the protection of the spirits and their power if they live in human settlements for too long. And as cities grow, they destroy the places elves can live. Mom said people think elves and humans shouldn't coexist because of that."

That would explain why half-elves weren't welcome in town. I wouldn't say that it couldn't be helped, but it sure seemed like a problem with deep roots.

"And then Dad said that Lord Grand tried to stir up trouble against the elves. He probably didn't like that another race had a claim on a portion of his lands. Especially in the forest with good hunting grounds. Eventually, the elves moved far away because of the hatred and violence. I was still so young that I don't really remember it."

I had suspected that things were bad, but I was shocked to learn that a whole society had been forced to migrate.

"Lord Grand is an extremist, but hostility against elves is growing throughout the kingdom. That's what drives me—the fact that humans and elves see each other as enemies. If I work really hard and make friends, I could make small changes to people's attitudes here in the city! If I could

find the strength—if I could be useful—then surely Roy would have to treat me fairly. That's something only a half-elf like me can do!" said Pomera, gripping her staff tightly as she spoke. Her face suddenly went red as she realized she'd gone off on a tangent.

"I-I'm sorry… I haven't even known you a day, and I'm just talking your ear off about these things. Not many people listen to me. I just…I-I'm really annoying, aren't I?"

"Not at all. I think it's an admirable goal."

I had a new respect for Pomera. It was a really difficult thing to be demonized, but somehow, she managed to only hate the system and not the people in the system. She looked timid, but she was taking the weight onto her own shoulders instead of resenting others. This little half-elf was actually very forward-thinking and had a fundamentally good heart.

"I'd like to help, if there's anything I can do," I said.

My only goal since leaving Cocytus was to make lots of memories that I could share with Lunaère when I saw her next, so she could experience the surface vicariously. Helping Pomera with her dream felt like it would be a good story to tell. I'd rather follow a dream than adventure aimlessly, even if it was someone else's dream.

My own dream wasn't very realistic. I had a fantasy about renegotiating with Naiarotop so I could see my cat, Kuromaru, again. Fat chance of that. Naiarotop hated my guts, and engaging in a debate with the Lower God probably wouldn't end well.

Besides, I'd hate to leave Lunaère here alone while I returned to Japan. I worried about Kuromaru, but he was a tough customer. I was sure he was already living off the land or some other stranger's charity.

Pomera stared at me with wide eyes and fat tears pouring down her cheeks.

"I-I'm sorry, I'm just really, really happy. No one's ever supported me, and I'm so happy I just started crying…" said Pomera as she wiped the tears away with her sleeve. "B-but I don't think I'm worth it. I don't have any way to repay you!"

I wish she'd have a little more self-confidence. It'd make talking to her a whole lot easier...

We finally arrived at the city gate and looked out at our hunting grounds.

So…goblins, huh? I'm going to have to hold back, or else things could go sideways. I'll need to adjust my tactics to the situation.

7

THE GUILD PAID 2,000 gold for each dead goblin. Pomera said that two people should aim to kill eight goblins a day. However, we were quickly surrounded by five of them as soon as we came out into a field.

Pomera mostly attacked with her staff, perhaps trying to save her magic for later. I tried to sandbag them by smacking them with the hilt of my sword, since killing them too fast would raise her suspicions.

"There's more than I'd expected…" I said, dodging a strike from a goblin's club. I thumped it with the pommel of my sword, and it went flying backward.

"Th-there's probably a goblin den nearby. We should report it to the Guild so some C-rank adventurers can investigate the area. This will be a difficult fight for just the two of us, so we should reduce their numbers and find a way to escape," said Pomera, and I nodded.

Easier said than done.

I'd tried striking a goblin gently with my blade when the fight started, but its HP was so low that its body turned to dust and disappeared, which made Pomera instantly suspicious.

HEROIC SWORD OF GILGAMESH
Value Class: Godly
Attack: +3500
Magic: +2500
The favorite sword of a prince born 3,000 years ago, who also happened to be the strongest man alive. Its radiance can directly cut the life force of monsters and demons. Legend speaks of the Golden Strike, an attack that is said to contain one third of the strength of the entire kingdom.
The prince used this sword to defeat the Nightmare Rites, a group of five demon kings. His victory ended their two-hundred-year reign and liberated his people. Afterward, the prince was counted among the Four Heroes of the Dark Ages.
After the prince died from a rare disease, both his body and this sword disappeared. It is said they were both taken to rest with the Gods.

It was a super cool sword that I'd received from Lunaère. It could release bursts of attacking light, and the description was really inspiring. But it was just way too powerful for fighting goblins. If I accidentally used even a fraction of the power I got from training with Lunaère, someone as pathologically kind as Pomera might see that as a reason to leave the party. I couldn't keep my secret forever, but I decided it was a conversation to have when we weren't being mobbed by low-level monsters.

The first goblin I killed disappeared in a puff of dust. I'd managed to convince Pomera that there was never a goblin there to begin with, but I

couldn’t make that mistake twice. Now I was trying to fight the monsters by parrying their club swings with the hilt of my sword.

I deflected an attack from a goblin and checked on Pomera just in time to see her staff being turned aside by the brute strength of a goblin’s attack.

Damn it, I wasn’t keeping an eye on her. Everything else will be pointless if she gets seriously injured.

I gently pushed the goblin in front of me with my foot, and it hurtled away. Then I turned to the goblin that Pomera was trying to hit with her staff and used the pommel of my sword to bonk it in the forehead. Its head snapped off at the neck and began to quickly roll away.

“Are you all right?!” I shouted.

Meanwhile, the goblin I’d kicked collided with a tree, which tore its body into pieces, and the head of the other one still rolled merrily across the field.

“Y-yes, I’m all right…” said Pomera, her mouth gaping in amazement as she watched the goblin’s head spin off into the distance.

G-goblins are weaker than I thought. I’m going to have to work on some moves to keep up the sham.

The two remaining goblins dropped their clubs and ran.

“G-good, the last two ran. That means we finished three off…” I said as I checked the goblins’ remains.

The Guild told me that they used the goblins’ left ear as proof of a kill, so we needed to make sure we got those. I didn’t think I could talk the guild into believing a handful of sand was an ear, so no luck on the one who’d taken a proper slash from the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh.

“Er…two. We finished off two,” I said, correcting myself. “So we just need to kill six more.” Then I remembered that the ears were still attached to the rolling head.

“K-Kanata…I know it’s rude to pry, but…are you actually high-level?” asked Pomera hesitantly after gazing in the direction of the traveling goblin head.

“Well…maybe I hit it in just the right spot. Or something…”

“In the right spot—?” Pomera started to ask, but we heard the rumble of feet in the distance. I turned and saw a mob of goblins, nearly twenty of them, running straight in our direction.

This group didn’t just have the normal kind of goblins either—three of them had mottled red spots. Earlier, Pomera had said we should run if we saw any goblins with red spots. Apparently, if goblins formed a pack, they dyed the skin of the strongest members red to signify that they were leaders.

“A-a monster stampede! This shouldn’t happen this close to town! Even if we run, they’ll surround us! Goblins are afraid of fire, so use the torches. They’re better than nothing!” cried Pomera.

Whether I had a secret or not, this didn't seem like a good situation to hold back. I readied my sword and saw to my surprise that a human was running well ahead of the pack of goblins. He was a short man with a hooked nose, hunkered over and playing a strange jade flute. He grinned with spite in his eyes as he dashed toward us.

I knew that guy… We'd passed him when we left the Guild. Now he ran up to us a few moments ahead of the monsters and gloated.

"Hee hee… You shoulda given Octavio yer magic bag when you had the chance! You'd at least still have yer lives," said the man, putting on a show of covering his mouth and letting out a loud laugh.

It was Octavio's toady. I wasn't exactly sure how he was controlling the goblins, but looking at their strange agitation, I guessed that jade flute had some sort of power to stir them into a frenzy. In any case, it was apparent that this wasn't a coincidental meeting. I might not know how he found us, but it was obvious that this wasn't his first rodeo.

"I hate cleaning up after a job, y'know. This way, you'll just be a couple of morons who bit off more goblin than they could chew. Even if somebody squeals, I'll just play dumb and say we had no beef. Small fry like you shoulda known yer place, but you had to resist. Octavio hates that more than anything," said the man. He pocketed the flute and pulled out what looked like a yellow *gyoza*, which he threw in Pomera's direction. "It's a Smelly Dumpling…filled with fermented juice and rotten meat. Dontcha love it?"

I'd heard that the smell of rotten meat drew goblins, so the dumpling had to be a lure. He probably hoped that he could slip away when the monsters decided to fight us for the disgusting treat.

"Aaah!" shrieked Pomera.

"Duck!" I shouted as I leaped in front of her and caught the dumpling. I flung it at the goblins to buy us a little time.

Sure enough, Octavio's sidekick was making a break for it. As he ran, he shouted, "Tsk… So you managed to catch it, eh? Not a problem. I just gotta be faster than you newbies! Here's a tip: S'not strength or magic that makes levels diff'rent, it's speed! The goblins will target you, and—"

He faceplanted as I caught up and gently tripped him.

"Agh! No way yer that fast!" He howled as he struck the ground.

"You're right. Speed is where the difference in levels is most obvious," I said, locking eyes with the man as he raised his head. The color drained from his face, and he opened his mouth in shock.

"J-just what level are you? 30? *40*?!"

He seems to assume I can't be above level 100.

There was no more time to chat. The pack of goblins finally arrived to attack. I couldn't let either Pomera or Octavio's crony see me disintegrate them, so I returned my sword to its sheath.

"D-don't give up, Kanata! I'll do my best, and now he has no choice but to help us too! We'll find a way out of this somehow…"

I doubted that I'd be afraid even if a hundred goblins were attacking us. I would probably just use a spell to finish them all off at once. But in this situation, I stepped forward and caught one of the goblin leader's clubs with my bare hand before kicking it lightly in the chest.

It exploded. Its ribcage shattered, and its limbs fell to the ground as its torso went flying off to the horizon.

"Wha…?" I saw all the color drain from the little man's face.

It looked like kicking them to death was off the table. I tried slapping another goblin with the flat of my hand. My strike pierced the monster's abdomen, and I quickly pulled back before any blood or goblin goo had a chance to get on my hand. That seemed to work. As long as I was quick, I could kill them without getting blood on my robe, and as a bonus, they dropped where we were standing instead of sailing off into the distance.

Less than a minute later, the chaos had ended, and I stood over a pile of goblin corpses.

"Kanata…j-just how strong—" said Pomera, as her jaw dropped. It looked like the cat was out of the bag.

"F-forgive me! O-Octavio put me up to it!" the man said, sweat pouring down his ghost-white face.

I bent down and plucked the jade flute from his pocket before tossing it in the air, where I punched it. It shattered, and the pieces rained down on top of him. His eyes opened wide, and he sucked in air.

"I-I'll leave town! I swear, you won't never see me again! J-just please have mercy!"

I closed my eyes and pondered. He'd tried to kill us, and from the way he had bragged, I was pretty sure that he'd done this before. But I couldn't bring myself to kill someone who was begging for his life.

"Tell Octavio that I won't let this slide again," I said.

"N-no doubt! I'll def'nitely tell him!" The man stood up and started heading back toward the city as fast as he could. He dragged the leg I'd caught to trip him, and he struggled for breath as he hobbled away.

I wish I could believe that this is the end of dealing with Octavio…

8

AFTER THE LITTLE MAN ran off toward the city, we busied ourselves by cutting the ears off the dead goblins. Since there had been twenty of them, we easily made our quota for the day, even if I'd disintegrated one and sent a few others flying off into the wilderness.

"Kanata… Y-you're really powerful, aren't you?" said Pomera sadly. I figured this conversation was bound to happen. Having an overpowered hunting partner obviously made her uncomfortable, but I didn't think it would make her this unhappy.

"Sorry I didn't tell you. I didn't want you to feel like you weren't good enough," I said.

"I-it's okay. I completely understand why you would be concerned."

"It's just…I didn't think I could trust anyone else. And you've taught me so much about the city and working as an adventurer. You really have helped me a lot!"

"B-but, I'll just hold you back from now on…" She hung her head.

Was that really what she thought? If things went wrong and people found out about my level or items, I could end up drawing the wrong kind of attention. It seemed to me that she didn't truly understand how much I appreciated her trust and the working relationship we were building.

"There's still so much I don't know, and most people here don't seem that nice. I don't know if I can find anyone else I can trust, and I also want to get to know you better. I'd like you to stay in my party."

"…"

Pomera gazed silently at the ground, deep in thought. At heart, I knew she was an adventurer. She wanted to work hard while being useful to others and building equal relationships. If she stayed with me, she'd only be assisting outside of battle, which wasn't in line with her goals. Even if I tried paying her more to make up for that, I didn't think she'd accept it.

Raising her head, she said, "Kanata…you're a magic user, aren't you?"

I looked down at my robes. Even though I hadn't had many opportunities to use spells since coming to the surface, I was certainly dressed for the job. Even unarmed, I could kill goblins all day long, but spells were my bread and butter if I ever fought anything close to my level.

"Yeah, I'm a magic user."

Pomera bowed her head to me and said, "Um…if it's not too much trouble, would you please train me in magic?"

"You want *me* to train you?"

"I understand it's asking a lot, but…th-there's no one else I can ask. I've been trying as hard as I can, but I feel like I've reached the limit of what I can learn on my own. Unless I get some proper training, I'll never be more than a burden."

I knew the feeling. Some aspects of magic were impossible to study on your own. Without Lunaère's advice, magic books, magic items, and her brutal training program, I'd never have gotten this far in a thousand years.

Pomera was focused on white magic, and being a half-elf meant she was also predisposed to spirit magic. I didn't know much about those areas, but I did have Lunaère's magic books and a bag full of elixirs. Training Pomera seemed like something I could do.

"I-if I could just get strong enough, then…I might be able to be real friends with Roy and Holly," said Pomera.

Ugh… Those two. I wish she could just forget about them.

I might not agree with her reasoning, but when we formed a party, I'd promised that I would do what I could to help Pomera achieve her dreams. At least this way, we'd still stick together as a party.

"Okay. I'm not sure if I'll be a good teacher, but…I look forward to working with you more," I said, offering my hand.

Pomera looked around hesitantly and then pointed to herself to confirm that this was really happening. I nodded. She smiled happily and took my hand.

"Th-thank you, Kanata!"

I was happy that our party hadn't fallen apart, but it felt strange. Almost no time had passed since I was a student, and now I was suddenly the master. My thoughts turned to memories of Lunaère. I desperately wanted to see her again. How long would I have to stay away before she'd let me come visit again?

9

POMERA AND I returned to the Guild to turn in the goblin ears.

"All these…?" The receptionist's eyes were wide as she looked back and forth between me and Pomera. "It hasn't even been half a day since you accepted the request. Y-you two are F-rank adventurers, right…?"

She counted the ears. Partway through, her hands stopped and she jumped. "A goblin leader? No…*three* goblin leaders?! There's no way…"

"Are they really that different from regular goblins?" I asked before I could stop myself. Other than their red spots, I hadn't been able to tell them apart from the other goblins in combat. The receptionist eyed me suspiciously.

"Did you two *really* fight these goblins, or are you trying to pull something funny? This is…more than I would expect from F-rank adventurers."

"Uh, well, you see—" I said, fumbling for words, but Pomera rushed up and cut me off.

"Yes! Th-the thing is that Kanata has only just registered, and I think he might be a bit stronger than his rank. Oh! And the reason we returned so quickly was to tell you there is probably a goblin den south of the city."

Pomera laid out a map and explained the situation to the receptionist.

"Well, there have been some other odd reports from that area," she admitted. "If that's the case, I suppose your story makes sense. Thank you for the information."

I didn't think the receptionist was entirely convinced, but she did seem like she was ready to put this conversation behind her.

That was close. I'm so glad Pomera knew what to do.

"Kanata, have you worked as a bodyguard or alchemist before?" she asked, changing topics. "You should be able to make it to D-rank, or even C-rank, as long as you prove yourself a little."

I didn't really care about the rank system beyond the new jobs it would unlock, but it might be nice to have a goal. C-rank sounded like it could have some side benefits, so I decided to aim for that.

"Him? C-rank?! Give me a break…"

I turned around and saw Octavio glaring at me from across the room, deep furrows carved into his face. His nose twitched in a snarl. I didn't see his sidekick, so I wondered if the message had been delivered.

I glared back, and Octavio turned to walk off. I hoped that was the end of it.

"This is amazing! Now we can take some E-rank requests too!" said Pomera as she accepted our payment.

Divided in half, it came to 33,000 gold. If we worked twenty days a month, that would be 660,000 gold. Taking our expenses into consideration, that was a decent amount if a gold piece was roughly the same as a yen. I'd

expected to live frugally on the surface out of necessity, but now it looked like I might be able to afford a little luxury.

"Here you are, Kanata," said Pomera as she handed me the entire pouch of gold.

"What about your share? Aren't we splitting it?"

"N-no way! I didn't even help. If anything, I made things worse! Besides, I can't expect you to teach me without paying you!"

"But you're teaching me things too. How do you expect to make a living if you don't take some money?"

"I-I'm fine! I'm used to sleeping outside. Mom taught me how to cook goblin worms, so I won't starve!"

"Y-you eat goblins?!"

"They're commonly eaten in elven villages. I haven't heard of many people eating them in Arroburg though…"

I didn't know what a goblin worm was, but it sounded nauseating. But more to the point, I would be constantly worrying about her if she didn't at least take enough money to rent a room and feed herself properly.

Pomera and I were still arguing when we heard a crazed voice from the other reception desk. An agitated man was shouting and gesturing wildly at the lady who sat behind it.

"I swear I *seen* it! It was a huge *bat* with one eye! It was a *summoned* spirit!"

"Oh, it's you again…" The receptionist seemed unfazed, as if this was a common occurrence. "All right, so what happened this time?"

"It's a *crime* to summon a spirit and let it loose! Nobody's going to do that without some kind of *plan*! It's got to be that Evil Priest Notts, releasing them spirits for reconnaissance because he *knows* he can't walk around outside himself! That's the *only* explanation! And yet *you* people said my Notts sighting was false information and started taking the posters down. What's the *meaning* of this?!"

I looked, and sure enough, the wanted posters for the humanoid dragon were gone.

"That was Lord Grand's decision," she responded tersely. "Yelling at us won't do anything. You might have been mistaken. There's no ruling out a prank either. Or perhaps you have some sort of phobia that causes you to see humanoid dragons everywhere."

"*What* did you say?!" It was obvious that this guy couldn't read the room.

Just then, two guards came into the building and made a beeline for reception. They pinned in the ranting man from either side.

"Wh-what the *hell* are you doing?!"

"This guy again…" muttered a guard as he wrestled to control the man's left arm. "Sir? Sir! Please stop resisting. You're not going to listen, are you? Okay, come with us!"

The guards dragged the man out of the Guild despite his attempts to wriggle free. He still ranted and screamed as they pulled him through the door.

"You'll *regret* this! Wake up, *sheeple*! If Notts is here, the whole city will be *destroyed* before you know it! Yet that *moron,* Lord Grand, isn't doing anything about it! Everyone here will *die*!"

"Quiet! Didn't I just tell you to stop resisting?!"

One of the guards hit the man on the head, and he went sprawling. They grabbed his shoulders before he could stand and dragged him outside.

The guild erupted in jeers and concerned shouting. I was a little anxious too. Maybe Notts really was targeting Arroburg.

Pomera hugged her staff to hide her discomfort.

"Is Notts really that bad?" I asked. She blinked at the unexpected question. She must have thought I already knew everything there was to know about Notts.

"It's not an exaggeration that the whole city could be destroyed if he showed up. He said we should do something about it, but there's nothing we could do. Humanoid dragons aren't just a threat to cities; some have destroyed entire countries by themselves. There are stories of humanoid dragons who've killed hundreds of thousands of people. "

So they really were that bad. If level truly was everything, even comparing power differences between fairly normal people could be like comparing a child to a tank.

Maybe I shouldn't underestimate these humanoid dragons.

10

AT THE END of my first day in Arroburg, I invited Pomera back to the room I had rented. I wasn't sure if that was a proper thing to do, but there wasn't anywhere else secluded enough to teach her magic.

"Th-thank you so much for this, Kanata! I'm not very good at remembering things, but I'm going to try very hard!" said Pomera as she flexed her arms.

"Don't worry, I'm not a particularly smart person either. I still don't know a whole lot about white magic…" I said as I made a magic circle in the air. I had only been keeping the essentials in my magic bag since the space was kind of limited. "Space-Time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket."

"S-space-time magic…and y-you can use up to level 8?!" Pomera's mouth dropped open in shock. I didn't get what the big deal was. I mean, even Lovis could use Dimension Pocket.

I stuck my hand in the magic circle and pulled out a magic book before handing it to Pomera, who sagged under the weight.

"I-it's really thick… This book is probably very valuable." she said.

"It was a gift from my teacher, so I honestly don't know how much it's worth. It does have a lot of sentimental value though, so please treat it carefully."

"O-of course! I'll only read it after I've washed my hands!" she promised, carefully setting the book down on the small table. Then she peered closely at the book and muttered, "This looks really technical…"

I pulled book after book from the Dimension Pocket. "Hmm…we'll need this one too, and this one, oh and that one." She needed to study white magic and spirit magic, so I picked books that were immediately relevant to her interests. Teaching her would probably deepen my knowledge of those two schools of magic too. In the end, I chose ten books and thought that should be a good start. Pomera's expression had tightened with each book I added to the stack.

"Kanata—eh. I'm really happy that you want to do this, but I'm not sure this lesson plan is…realistic," she said. Then she added softly to herself, "This would take me a few years to understand."

"I think we should be able to get through this much in two days."

"Two days?!"

That seemed like a long time to me too. But Pomera's base level was low and so were her magic skills. Even if she read everything in the magic books, she wouldn't be able to grasp the full meaning very well. We needed start with the fundamentals and build from there. Then we could handle both magic training and leveling at the same time—just like Lunaère had trained me.

I started to feel a little excited when I wondered if I would be as good a teacher as Lunaère had been. It made me understand how teaching could be fun for her.

"We will definitely be able to do this," I said to Pomera. "I have elixirs that force you to continue concentrating and temporarily increase your memorization capacity."

"*F-force* you to concentrate?!" Her face was turning whiter and whiter. Was it really that daunting?

To be fair, there were moments when the sheer difficulty of my training had me second guessing Lunaère's methods. At times, I suspected that she was being needlessly rigorous in an attempt to make me give up and stay in Cocytus forever. That theory fell apart when she kicked me out of the dungeon, though.

But hey, now I was getting used to life as a human on the surface. For sure, there were difficult moments, but I found that they soon became fond memories when I looked back on them.

"Come to think of it, I also have elixirs that you can take instead of sleeping. You shouldn't take them multiple days in a row, so we'll have to keep tabs on that," I continued.

"I-instead of *sleeping*?!"

I took off the Sorcerer King's Research and handed it to Pomera as I tried to decide what lesson to begin with. The Twin-Minds Method was essential but best saved for last. I continued pondering as I took more potions from the Dimension Pocket and lined them up.

"Uhh…Kanata, it's just…I know this is awkward because I'm the one who asked in the first place, but I'm not really sure that… I mean, it looks like the difference in our strength is just too great. I'm sorry, it was very rude of me to ask you to teach me."

"Hmm…?" I turned back to Pomera with an armful of potions.

Our eyes met. Sweat was running down her face.

D-did she just say she wanted to stop?

"Sorry, I was busy organizing potions. Could you say that again?" I asked hesitantly.

"Umm, well…" said Pomera. She fidgeted and broke eye contact. "I-it was nothing… Just, I'm really happy that you're doing so much preparation. I-I will do my best…at all costs."

Huh, guess I just heard her wrong.

11

WE SPENT TWO FULL DAYS on Pomera's magic training. With some questionable use of the elixirs, she'd managed to learn everything in the magic books. We even practiced casting some high-rank but low-risk spells.

In addition to white and spirit magic, I taught her some fire magic so she'd have some extra ways to attack in a fight. For her purposes, that covered the basics.

While we were at it, Pomera taught me some common knowledge things about Locklore and the city. I had been completely lost and confused when I first came to Arroburg, but at least now I wasn't wandering aimlessly every time I went walking in town.

Having plowed through the lessons in the books, I decided that we should focus on power-leveling Pomera to increase her magic power pool. We took an F-rank job request from the Guild, which required us to gather medicinal herbs and headed off to a field just outside the city. As a bonus, there was a chance we might encounter monsters whose meat, fur, organs, and teeth could fetch a high price. If we ran across those enemies and brought their valuable bits back to the Guild, we could make a little extra cash—even if the monsters weren't explicitly targets. Yet another bonus was that turning in monster parts counted toward advancement in the Guild's rating system. If we kept getting steady work and skimming off the monster-part market on the side, we'd be C-rank in no time.

"A-are you sure it's safe to come this far out from town?" asked Pomera timidly as she looked around.

"Is it really that far?"

"It's not the distance per se… Th-this is a dangerous area. Maybe we should go back a little. Even the best adventurers don't go near the Enchanted Forest. The monsters that live there are really tough."

Well, I walked through it and I was fine…

In a relative sense, the monsters in the forest were dangerous for someone like Pomera. The entrance to Cocytus was also in there. There was also a chance that truly powerful monsters existed in the forest but I just never ran into them.

"All right. Let's go back a bit—" I said. Just then, I heard an animal in the distance.

"Awoooo!" A pack of six black wolves came dashing toward us.

"D-dark wolves! They live in the Enchanted Forest!" said Pomera.

We probably should have turned back sooner, I thought. There's no way that they're stronger than the monsters in Cocytus, though. I can handle them even if I have to guard Pomera.

I drew the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh and used Status Check on the wolves. None were above level 22, so I returned my sword to its sheath.

They're not even above a D-rank adventurer in level, I thought to myself. Well, I guess this is the norm for monsters on the outskirts of the forest. I wonder how much they'll sell for at the Guild.

"B-be careful, Kanata! Dark wolves work in a group, and even you could die if you make a mistake…" said Pomera.

A thought struck me. "They might be the perfect way for you to gain experience, Pomera."

"What?!" Pomera's eyes grew wide with fear as she looked at me. "K-Kanata…that's a joke, right? You've taught me a lot of magic, but I'm still only level 7!"

I leapt diagonally behind Pomera. "Earth Magic Level 4: Clay Shield."

Forming a magic circle, I placed it on my forearm. Earth rose from the ground and gathered in the circle, turning it into a large clay shield.

"A-amazing… You did that so fast!"

"Alchemy Magic Level 15: Adamant Flux."

I formed another magic circle, and green flames burned across the face of the shield, leaving the material transformed as they died away. Now I had a metal shield that shined with an iridescent green luster.

Adamant was a kind of stone that formed in deep veins of metal ore that were subjected to high levels of magic from ley lines. Normally, it took eons of exposure to create adamant, but the alchemy spell let me recreate the process in just a few moments.

Pomera stood dumbfounded. Looking at my arm, she stammered, "What…? N-no way! How could a clay shield turn into metal like that?"

"Don't worry about it for now. I'll defend against their attacks. You just keep casting attack spells."

True to my word, I used the adamant shield to deflect a dark wolf leaping at us. Even if multiple wolves came at me at once, I was able to turn them away handily.

"Aah, eek!" she cried, cringing.

"It's okay, Pomera! I've got you covered!"

"B-but…but…"

"You won't gain any levels if you don't attack!"

I may have handled the defense, but Pomera was able to step forward and attack once her fear began to melt away. It took a long time, but she ended up taking out the entire dark wolf pack, one by one.

Pomera's staff fell to the ground, and she covered her face with her hands. I'd given her a few elixirs during the battle, but her MP was almost drained.

"Th-that's all I can handle. I cast so many Fireballs. I think I'm going to throw up…" said Pomera, sinking to the ground with exhaustion. "I'm so sorry. I don't think I'm cut out to be an adventurer… I don't even have the energy to apologize—"

Earlier, I'd told her about my Status Check ability, and she gave me permission to use it on her for training purposes. What I saw when I used it after the fight was a fantastic surprise.

"You did great, Pomera-san! You might be tired, but you gained six levels in that fight! Let's keep going," I said, patting Pomera on the shoulder. She raised her head and looked at me.

"I-I…really did great?"

"You were amazing! When I first started my training, my master had to make golems and bind them so they couldn't fight back. Even that wore me out. Seeing you level up makes me proud."

"Ah, hee hee… Y-you're making me blush." She looked away, covering her cheeks which had turned pink.

"Sorry I cut you off earlier. I just got excited. What were you saying?" After I asked, Pomera's expression hardened. A moment later, she smiled slightly, picked up her dropped staff, and set her mouth in a firm line.

"N-nothing! I want to keep going for as long as I can! I really appreciate your help!" she said as she stood. I gave her a big nod.

"Ah, oh…" She teetered and almost fainted. I quickly moved to scoop her up before she hit the ground.

"Oh…s-sorry!" I pulled my hands away from her.

"I-it's okay. It looks like I don't have much strength left…"

To her credit, she was certainly putting on a brave face. I reached into my magic bag and pulled out an elixir. "Here you go, Pomera-san."

"Thank you, Kanata—"

"Drink that, and we'll head into the forest. We'll hunt some higher-level monsters now that you've gained a few levels."

Pomera blinked. She looked at the elixir, and sweat started to pour down her face.

"T-today?"

"Eh?" I didn't know what to say.

"N-never mind! Let's go! I've already decided I'm following you anyway!" she said and gulped down the elixir.

"Well…if you're starting to feel some mental fatigue, then we can take a break…" Maybe Lunaère had rubbed off on me, and I couldn't tell when my student was done for the day.

"I'm fine! I'll show you I can do this; I won't betray your kindness!"

A while later, we found ourselves in the forest, fighting bears. They were around level 30, so normally they fell under C-rank adventurers' jurisdiction. The first one we encountered had white fur, massive limbs, and a single eye. Like with the wolves, I defended while Pomera attacked. But the bear's roar drew two more of its kind into the battle as we fought, and the two new bears called more reinforcements in turn. Before we knew it, we were surrounded by seven bears.

I jumped around in front of Pomera, blocking bear attacks with my adamant shield while she tried to launch offensive spells toward our enemies.

“S-Spirit Magic Level 3: Sylph Sword!” Pomera cast desperately with tears filling her eyes.

A green light rushed through the air and sliced into one of the bears.

“Spirit magic might reduce the amount of magic you use by channeling it through nature, but it’s difficult to control. You’re not going to do much damage unless you calm down and focus,” I said.

“B-but, but… Eek!”

I moved to deflect a blow from a bear that made a lunge for her. Its large paw bent backward at a sickening angle, and its entire body bounced behind the rest of the pack. I made a mental note to try to be gentler with the bears in the future.

“Please trust me. They can’t get through my defense!”

“O-okay, I understand. But…but…!”

Three bears came at Pomera from different directions as she tried to form a magic circle. I raised my shield and parried them away, trying to buy her space to cast.

The battle lasted until nightfall.

“Pomera-san, you’re level 22 now! You did it!” I said.

She collapsed to the ground, completely limp. “P-Pomera-san, are you all right?”

“Kanata…is today’s training…?”

“We’re done for today. We should head back to town.”

“Oh, really…” Her lifeless expression changed ever so slightly to reveal a small smile. Her color didn’t improve much.

“H-here, drink this elixir!” I said.

“N-no! No more! I don’t want to drink any more elixirs today!” Pomera said, her eyes wide as she reached out to bat the potion away.

“Okay, okay,” I put the elixir back in my magic bag.

Pomera walked unsteadily as we headed back to Arroburg.

“To be honest…your training method is so intense that I didn’t think I’d be able to keep up. But I managed to get through today. I’m starting to feel a bit more confident too,” said Pomera, smiling a little while she hobbled along beside me.

“That’s great! Once you gain a few more levels, we can try out the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm,” I said, and Pomera’s expression froze.

“Wh-what is that? It doesn’t sound very good at all.”

“It’s a bit, uh, dangerous and difficult. But it *is* the most efficient way to grind levels. The Mirror might not be the only reason I’m so powerful, but it made me the man I am today!”

Pomera stopped walking, and her knees buckled.

“Pomera-san?!”

“L-leave me…”

12

AFTER A WEEK of magic studies and monster hunting, Pomera reached level 38. She'd also become a better white mage than me, so I was secretly planning on having her train me after she learned a bit more.

Even so, I was beginning to doubt my methods. The rate at which she was gaining levels was slowing down. We were still making progress, but the training wasn't advancing at the pace to which I was accustomed. I never imagined I could be as good of a master as Lunaère, but Pomera was still relying on me, and I wanted to help her achieve her dreams.

One major problem was that our fighting styles were completely different, so combat training never quite worked out as I'd planned. Lunaère mostly just taught me to copy her techniques, but I couldn't apply that same curriculum to a white mage like Pomera.

On top of that, we'd been burning through elixirs. Though Lunaère taught me how to make more of them, I was struggling to gather all the materials I would need. If I had time to do research, I was fairly sure I could make similar potions out of local monster parts. I didn't want to slow us down though, so we just kept on studying books and killing monsters.

So, after another morning of adventuring deep into the forest to fill a Guild request, we managed to reach our goal before noon. We picked up our swag and made the long hike back to the Guild.

"I never thought I'd see the day I managed to get close to level 40. Do you think Roy and Holly would be friends with me now?" chatted Pomera happily as we waited in line for reception. I didn't hear her. I was intent on brooding about the power-leveling situation instead.

"Lunaère raised my level to 100 after a week of training, but we're not even halfway there. And we're slowing down…" I mumbled to myself.

"K-Kanata, are you okay…? I thought I heard you say something about level 100 after a week?" asked Pomera timidly.

I forced a smile and brushed it off, but I had decided it was time.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"What have you two been up to this time?" asked the receptionist with a big sigh as we approached her desk.

We'd run across some dark wolves (around level 20), saber-toothed rabbits (also around level 20), and horned hares (level 30-ish) when we were out hunting, so I opened my magic bag to pull out the wolf furs, rabbit fangs, and hare horns.

Pomera had warned me that using a level 8 spell like Dimension Pocket would raise a few eyebrows in town. I was a little skeptical when she told me there were some B-rank adventurers who could only use level 6 spells at the highest. Level 8 spells were considered extremely powerful, and people tried to avoid using them battle since they took such a long time to cast and were usually overkill.

After sorting through our monster parts and filling out the proper forms, the receptionist paused as she looked at our registration papers. “You two moved up to E-rank a few days ago, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I replied.

“I heard a rumor that they might make an exception and promote you two directly to C-rank—you’re both clearly stronger than that already. It would be a great help to the Guild to have a couple more C-rank adventurers around to take important jobs that need doing. It probably won’t happen for a few days…but give it some thought.”

“Really?”

That would be an incredible stroke of luck. We’d be able to accept better requests, and those would be way more efficient for raising our rank than selling random monster parts. Also, I could use the Guild registration as proof of my identity once my rank was high enough. Local lords often gave high-ranking adventurers special perks at government facilities—though those varied on a city-by-city basis. Regardless, an early promotion to C-rank seemed like a real blessing.

“You did it, Kanata! B-but I really feel like I’m just riding your coattails…” said Pomera.

I felt eyes boring into my back. When I turned, I saw Octavio glaring at us.

“How the hell? Those two brats gotta be up to something…” he muttered to himself quietly.

Him again?

Our eyes met, but he just huffed in annoyance and walked away. Our swift climb up the ladder appeared to have stuck in his craw. There was no sign of his crony, so the little man must have been true to his word when he said he was leaving town.

“Hey, Kanata—it’s still early, right? Should we study magic this afternoon?” asked Pomera.

She was stuttering less when she talked to me lately. Perhaps her training had helped her build confidence, or maybe we were spending so much time together that she simply felt more comfortable with me.

“Well…there *is* something I’d like to try. Let’s give it a go once we get back,” I said.

“S-something you want to try?” Pomera’s eyes narrowed dubiously.

If I give her the Ouroboros Wheel, we can probably avoid the worst. It’ll drain some of her MP and leave her wounded, but I’ll be there to patch her up.

Once we got back to my room, I took the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm from my Dimension Pocket. Placing it in the center of the room, I removed the magic cloth that covered the mirror’s surface.

“Wh-what is this? It’s definitely not a good item… I feel an intense evil coming from it,” said Pomera, trembling. Elves were sensitive to the moods

of the spirits and the flow of energy, and the mirror must have been overwhelming for her to be around.

"It's all right. Here, the Ouroboros Wheel has the power to force its wearer to remain alive. You might die a little, but you won't die completely."

"W-what do you mean, *'die a little'*?!" shrieked Pomera.

"Pomera-san. I want to help you. Other than my master, you're the first person who helped me out of the kindness of your heart."

"K-Kanata…" She smiled a little at that, but then her eyes opened wide as she returned to the situation at hand. "B-but! Can I honestly be ready for this at my level?!"

Evidently, her growing confidence didn't extend to entering an evil mirror and fighting demonic horrors. I just didn't see any alternative. Training inside the Cursed Mirror was the best way to grind levels.

"We've got to keep going, Pomera. I really believe in your dream of making friends through your adventuring and becoming a bridge between elves and humans. It's wonderful, and I want to help you get stronger so we can make sure it comes true!"

Pomera's face turned red. She stared at me, seemingly entranced.

"T-thank you. Nobody's ever supported me like that except my mom and dad…"

I smiled at her and turned toward the Cursed Mirror.

"All right, let's go. We'll pass through the mirror's surface and get to work."

"Wh-what…? You mean right now?!"

Despite her fear, she rushed to follow when I slipped through the mirror. The ground and walls shone with the same multicolored light I remembered. Then Pomera appeared from the portal's dark smudge and ran after me.

"K-Kanata…what is this strange place?"

I drew the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh and made an adamant shield with my other hand.

"You're going to use your sword? I thought you said it was too powerful."

"I still have to be careful—you're the one with the Ouroboros Wheel now," I said with a smile and a shrug. Pomera turned as white as a sheet.

That's when I looked up at the ceiling. I noticed ten humanoid candle monsters with crimson eyes fixed on us. Their fiery mouths opened wordlessly, charring the tips of their black hair while their pale white skin melted and dripped to the floor.

"We've got company!" I threw down my adamant shield before wrapping my arm around Pomera and leaping backward.

"Eek! Kanata?!"

"Groah!"

A couple of the demons dropped onto the ground where we had been standing. I saw one land on the adamant shield, causing it to buckle.

Correcting my stance before lunging at the pair of monsters, I managed to cut both of them cleanly through the middle.

"K-Kanata…Kanata! Wh-what are th-these monsters?!" Pomera was trembling violently.

"They're demons. I, uh, don't know much more about them than that."

"This is crazy! B-but you already killed two of them, right?"

The upper halves that I'd chopped off began to melt and then came together into a blob. Their new shape resembled a large white head.

"Kanata, look!"

"Yeah…they do that sometimes."

The other candle demons dropped to the ground and raised their arms to point at us. Their fingers stretched out with amazing speed, heading right for us. I managed to dodge most of the attacking appendages while continuing to hold Pomera. The ones I couldn't dodge were cut short by my sword.

"Pomera, attack them with fire magic! There aren't any spirits here, so it's your only option to get some damage in!"

"I c-can't!" she said, clinging to me.

"It's okay, just fire off spells! We're not running out of demons any time soon!"

"I'm so w-worthless! I'm sorry, I can't live up to your expectations!"

Lunaère was able to hold the demons back with a barrier, but I didn't have that luxury. I knew this had to be terrifying for Pomera. I had hoped that exposure to her fear would eventually let her build a mental tolerance against the demons—but for a level 38 white mage, these candle demons were apparently too much, too soon.

"Space-Time Magic Level 17: Fracture!"

Black roots spread from the center of the magic circle, destroying the space around them. Even the sturdy ground of the Warped Realm was sundered by the encroaching darkness. As the candle demons dashed toward us, they were caught in the spell and shattered into millions of pieces.

"Calm down! I'll make sure you don't get hurt, and the Ouroboros Wheel is extra insurance in case the worst happens. You can even close your eyes and cast spells—there's so many targets that you're bound to hit something eventually."

"K-Kanata…"

The candle-demon shards apparently had a mind of their own—they merged and formed a new monster with dozens of molten wax arms. Like disgusting ropes, they stretched out to attack us from multiple angles.

"Eh, remind me not to use Fracture next time…"

I sliced frantically with the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, chopping off numerous arms. I got so wrapped up in trying to neutralize the threat that I almost elbowed Pomera in the head. I yanked my arm back just before I cracked her skull.

That hesitation was the opening a demon needed. A white arm burst from Pomera's chest, having snaked around to attack her from behind.

"Agh! Kana…ta…" Blood dripped from her mouth and the life faded from her eyes.

"Pomera-san!"

It was time to retreat. The Ouroboros Wheel did its job and brought her back from death's door, but she was still unconscious from the shock.

After exiting the mirror, I laid Pomera on the bed and carefully poured an elixir into her mouth. I was worried for a moment, but she soon awoke with a sputtering cough.

"Am I…am I alive…?" said Pomera, sitting up. "K-Kanata, I just had the worst nightmare… C-could you hold my hand?"

Her expression froze when she saw the Cursed Mirror. She gently pulled back the blanket and looked at the large hole in her clothing. I was glad she still had the Ouroboros Wheel because I think she might have died a little inside.

"I-it's okay! You'll get used to it. I-I did! We'll hold out a bit longer next time. Come on, let's get back to work!" I said, trying to cheer her up.

Pomera looked out the window, her eyes turning toward the blue sky as she said, "Mom, Dad… I'll be seeing you soon…"

13

FOUR DAYS LATER, I carried Pomera as a horde of demons chased me around. It was the usual parade of freaks—there was a child with a bloated head covered with a hundred eyes, a giant skeleton with thirty-two arms, and a demon that looked like a throbbing red tumor in a trench coat. It was absolutely insane, yet Pomera seemed to be getting used to the madness.

The longer we spent inside the mirror, the more demons showed up to harass us. Every now and then, I'd thin the horde with an Inferno Sphere or close in to take a few swipes at them with my sword.

"Fire Magic Level 7: Fireflies!" Pomera clung to me as she slowly formed the magic circle. Hundreds of crimson embers streaked irregularly toward the pursuing monsters and exploded on impact.

The spell had a large area of effect, so the damage was spread to lots of targets. As an added bonus, the low-level spell didn't really cause them to shift their aggression to her. The demons kept focusing on me, and I kept focusing on defending and running.

"All right, let's seal the deal…" I said, leveling my sword at the monsters. "Space-Time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb."

Like an old friend, the black light appeared, crushing all the demons in one go. We'd been using this method for two days now, and it had proven highly effective.

"Nice teamwork! I'm feeling good about—oh, crap!" I shouted.

From the twisted horizon, four buddha statues came flying toward us in a line. Each statue was painted a vibrant color that corresponded to a vicious area-of-attack spell. These guys were seriously bad news.

We could probably manage them one at a time, but a group of them could ruin our day if they worked together. To make matters worse, once you saw them, you were already in range. I wished I'd studied more barrier magic, because out in the open, we were toast.

"I'm sorry, Pomera-san. It's the buddha statues, and they're different colors. It was a good run while it lasted."

"Noo…!"

The world around us filled with lightning and flames. Millions of darts filled the air, and then another blast of flame engulfed us. Pomera's body was left charred and full of holes.

I hugged her tattered remains to me and made three quick hops with Short Gate until I was hovering above the buddhas.

"I'm out of here, but you're not getting off that easy!" I downed an elixir and dropped the empty vial to the ground. "Space-Time Magic Level 17: Fracture!"

The black roots tore them to pieces. I looked back to see their bodies fading into multicolored light as I dashed through the portal back to my bedroom.

“That was great! We were there for half a day, and you only died five times. Not as bad as it used to be, right?” I asked Pomera, who was lying on the bed after we got back to my room.

“I-it’s still *pretty* bad…”

I mended her clothing with Space-Time Magic Level 14: Repair.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get used to it eventually.”

“Kanata…I don’t think a-anyone can ever get used to that feeling.”

“I did.”

“…”

Now that I’d healed her and fixed her clothes, it was time to see what kind of progress we’d made. I used Status Check—she’d made it up to level 201.

I let out a sigh of relief. Even though it felt slow compared to my own training, we’d managed to get her to the first target of 200.

She was stronger than Lovis now, which was a major milestone. I still couldn’t believe that guy was a kingpin.

Dark charisma, *my ass!* I thought to myself.

“Pomera-san, we’ve reached level 201!”

“Level 201? You’re higher than I thou—” said Pomera before she sat up like a bolt, still wrapped in a blanket. “You’re level 201?!”

“Not me—you!” I cheered. If I were level 201, we’d both be taking dirt naps in the Cursed Mirror.

I reached over and picked up the Level Slate we’d purchased. My Status Check would tell me her level and basic stats, but to track the growth of her magic skills, we needed this device. A person could channel a little magic into it, and it would display all their detailed stats just like when I used Status Check on myself.

“If you don’t believe me, check for yourself.” I said, handing her the slate. She boggled at it in disbelief. “I know I’ve told you about your progress every so often, but seeing is believing.”

“Maybe I was in shock and didn’t understand…b-but this is impossible…”

“We’ve been shut up in the Cursed Mirror for a while now. Why don’t we take a walk around town and check how much you’ve grown?”

“You mean I can go outside?!”

“Of course… You don’t need my permission.”

We hadn’t done much adventuring work for the past few days, and the Guild probably wouldn’t give us that special promotion unless we got back to it. So we decided it was time to go monster hunting. Leaving my rented room, it was a quick trip to the Guild, where we accepted a D-rank fighting request to thin out some monsters.

Fighting requests were usually located close to the city. Nobody cared much about monsters in the wilderness, but the Guild tried to ensure that the surrounding areas and roads were kept clear for the benefit of public safety.

For this request, our target was a stray herd of iron cows. They looked kind of like regular cows but had oversized metal masks covering their heads. With a reputation for charging aggressively at people and thick hides that could turn away most sword blows, they were dangerous to anyone under level 25. I wouldn't have any problem with them, and now Pomera shouldn't either. We just needed to collect their masks as proof we'd done our jobs.

We walked for about an hour before finding a small group of three iron cows. They looked pretty beefy, but they reminded me of bovine versions of those big heads on Easter Island. We'd been told that under their tough hides were some high-end cooking ingredients, and I was a little curious to find out what beef from an iron cow tasted like.

True to their reputation, they charged the moment they saw us.

"It's been a while since we've fought regular monsters," I said as I looked at Pomera, gesturing to her that the monsters were all hers. She nodded and stepped forward while gripping her staff. I hoped she'd see just how powerful she'd become.

Pomera closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and I realized that she must be planning to use spirit magic. She was connecting herself to the spirits of the land and preparing to channel their power.

"They're only iron cows. You could probably just give them a thump with—" I said before her eyes opened wide and she pointed her staff at the charging animals.

"Spirit Magic Level 8: Salamander's Claw!"

Claws of brilliant flame slashed out, rushing across the ground to tear the iron cows in half with a muffled explosion. Their front halves were flung skyward, growing tinier as they ascended. Their rear halves simply collapsed, burning.

Pomera's mouth hung open as she looked at the cows and then turned back to me happily.

"I-I really am stronger!"

There was a loud clatter as their masks crashed back to earth. The sound made Pomera jump, and she looked quietly at the carnage.

The masks were completely destroyed.

The heat of the flame had weakened and split them, and the final impact obliterated what was left. The cows' flesh was black and burnt. I gathered a few pieces to see if anything could be salvaged and then placed them gently back on the ground.

"Welp… Let's find some different iron cows."

"S-sorry. I just thought that if I was testing my strength, I should use my most powerful spell…"

We walked on in search of more targets. They were scarce, so around noon, we took a break to rest and eat the rations we'd purchased at the general store.

“Do you think Roy and Holly will treat me fairly now?” murmured Pomera, her waterskin in hand.

“I think you shouldn’t worry about those two…”

Maybe she was right, though. Pomera had a unique outlook on life. She could hate the way things were without hating people. I resolved to be more supportive of her, especially since her new power would let her hold her own in most situations. I’m not sure I’d have felt the same if she were still level 7.

“They can’t possibly still be cold to me now.” said Pomera.

I recalled that Roy was only level 14. “I think the difference in levels could make things awkward.”

“I know, right?”

“They might respect you, but I’m not sure that being their friend is in the cards. Anyway, we should raise your level a little more, so you can be safe while you do your adventuring work.”

“Wait, are you saying level 200 isn’t enough? What exactly do you think could happen?”

“W-well, my master, Lunaère, said that the world can be very dangerous…”

“That seems like a really extreme outlook. I don’t know how to say this…but is it possible that Lunaère wasn’t being totally honest with you?”

I choked on the small bread roll I was eating.

That was impossible—Lunaère gained nothing from lying to me. Besides, I knew how pure and kind she was. Pomera just didn’t know how dangerous things truly were.

I was washing down the bread in my throat with some water when Pomera suddenly stood up.

“Someone’s coming this way. Maybe they took the same request as us?” she said.

I stood and looked down the road. Sure enough, there was a man walking straight toward us. He was burly with a flashy axe. Even at a long distance, I knew who it was by his swagger.

It was Octavio, the permanently D-rank adventurer. Our eyes met as he approached, and he grinned hatefully.

“Oh look, it’s the rich-kid wizard and his pet forest bogey.”

Pomera readied her staff and squared off to Octavio. “Y-you can say bad things about me, but I won’t let you insult Kanata! Take back what you said!”

“Don’t get above yourself, half-breed. You realize that pointing that staff at me means you’re going to die?” Octavio threatened, but Pomera refused to back down. She held her ground, glaring back at him. His face twisted with rage. “Oh? So, you *do* have a death wish! You think you’re better than me?”

I stepped in front of Pomera. “Come on…this isn’t a very friendly way to greet fellow adventurers.”

“Are you kidding? Or are you really that dumb, fancy lad?” said Octavio, puffing through his nose as he took the axe from his back. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this. When Offe suddenly disappeared, I let it slide. But then you really started to piss me off, so I took the same job, and here we are…together at last.”

Offe must be his sidekick—the guy who set a pack of goblins on us.

“What did we do to piss you off?” I asked.

“Don’t act dumb!” Octavio’s eyes grew wide, and a vein throbbed in his temple. “It’s obvious to everyone. You’re buying monster remains on the black market and turning them in to the Guild for the credit. The Guild does nothing because they make out like bandits.

“Rich wannabes like you, buying your way up the ranks, are the worst. Working adventurers like me end up getting the shaft! You’re just a brat, half-assing your way through life by throwing money at all your problems.”

He sort of had a point. It probably looked suspicious for a random traveling stranger to show up, form a party with a level 7 half-elf, and then do a speed run of the Guild system. But that wasn’t the real issue here. Before Pomera and I even started climbing the ranks, Octavio had tried to have Offe kill us. His excuses sounded plausible, but he had it in for us from the very beginning.

“I asked Offe-san to give you a warning, but it looks like he left town before he delivered it,” I said.

“Oh, that? I know you must have bought him off too. He gave me some lame ‘Oh, no, Octavio, he’s not just a rich boy with a magic bag, he’s really high-level’ story. Pah!”

“So he *did* tell you—in that case, you’ve come here prepared to face us. Are you sure you want to do that?” I had definitely told Offe to make sure Octavio knew I wasn’t going to let the next offense slide. I’d never killed a person and I didn’t want to kill someone now, but I couldn’t let this guy leave without any consequences.

“Prepared? You’re the ones who should be prepared. I’m not an idiot, and there’s no chance I’ll get caught for killing you two all the way out here. Besides, you morons are useless. Just a piece of trash half-breed and a little wussy rich boy. I’ll gladly kill both the master and his pet.”

Octavio was making me angry now too. His insults toward me were just stupid, but his racist attitude towards Pomera was disgusting. I might have made him mad by not handing over my magic bag, but my guess was that Pomera making C-rank was what really drove him crazy.

She bit her lip in discomfort while listening to Octavio rant, and I got even angrier. Calling her useless was completely out of line. Even Roy wasn’t happy when Pomera left him to join me. For all his slimy talk, he knew that she was useful. Pomera worked hard; she was kind-hearted, driven, and courageous.

Octavio was about to get a big surprise.

“I think you’re mistaken. In fact, we can prove that your accusations aren’t true. I assume you’ll back off after we show you?” I said.

“Huh?” Octavio scowled in confusion.

“You can fight Pomera-san one-on-one. If you lose, you’ll never bother us again. If she loses, you get my magic bag and my life.”

“M-me? Why me?” asked Pomera.

“Aren’t you upset by what he said about you?” I asked in return.

“W-well, yes…”

Pomera turned to Octavio hesitantly. She knew that her level was far higher than his, but she was still nervous. Even though she’d battled monsters and demons, Octavio was the first *person* she’d ever fought.

“Take him down, Pomera-san. You’ve got this,” I said, patting her shoulder.

“O-okay, I’ll try!” Pomera squeezed her staff and moved closer to Octavio.

“You’re going to have me kill the girl first? Figures. Well, that’s fine—I’m going to kill you both in the end anyway. I’ll cut her apart while you watch!”

Octavio raised his axe and menaced Pomera, and she began to make a magic circle. Much to my horror, I recognized the spell she was about to cast.

“Ha! Useless white magic!” jeered Octavio.

Pomera pointed her staff at him and shouted, “Fire Magic Level 5: Fireflies!” The magic circle spewed out a shower of flying red embers.

I panicked.

“P-Pomera-san, you don’t have to use magic!”

Her level was almost an entire order of magnitude greater than his, and a simple whack from her staff would have done him in. One of her fire spells might effortlessly burn him to ash.

“O-oh, you’re right! I was just nervous…”

Pomera dropped the tip of her staff, and the sparks took a dive toward the ground in front of Octavio’s feet.

“Y-you can use a level 5 spell?! Surprising, but it looks like your aim needs a little work.” Octavio grinned. But he was wrong. The damage from Fireflies didn’t come from the balls of flame themselves—it came from the explosions when they struck a solid object.

Pomera didn’t miss.

“Wha?!”

The ground at Octavio’s feet detonated.

“Aaah! Ow, that’s hot!” Octavio was launched high in the air by the blast, and he fell back to the ground with a thud.

Octavio rolled on the ground hugging his leg. His pant leg had burned away, leaving charred skin underneath and deep gouges in his calf from gravel kicked up by the explosion. A direct hit from the spell would have surely killed him.

“Th-that’s impossible… I-I can’t lose to a half-breed!” he said, groaning in pain.

A good portion of his leg muscle was torn away. He’d need some high-level white magic or a powerful elixir if he hoped to regain the use of the limb.

“Do you understand now?” I asked. “Don’t mess with us again.”

“Y-you pieces of trash!” Octavio tried to raise his axe with shaking arms, but Pomera pointed her staff at him. He dropped them in apparent surrender. “I-I was wrong… Forgive me… I-I’ll change my ways, I promise…”

Yet instead of contrition, there was rage in Octavio’s voice. A demonic look overtook his face.

“Huh?” Pomera pulled back in confusion as his expression changed.

Using his good leg, Octavio leaped into the air and brought his axe down toward Pomera’s head. “I gotcha now, half-breed! You’ll die here!”

Octavio grinned as he swung, but his smile didn’t last long. The moment he jumped, I slipped behind him and plucked the axe from his grasp. His empty hands whiffed through thin air.

“W-what…?!”

I’m not proud of what I did next. I was irate and defending my friend, but I still felt uncomfortable attacking another human. Unfortunately, he hadn’t left me with any other choice. And to make matters worse, now I knew that he couldn’t be trusted to surrender peacefully.

I didn’t know if the city’s lord or the guard would get involved in disputes between adventurers. But I was a drifter and Pomera was a second-class citizen. If Octavio went back to Arroburg now, he’d keep plotting revenge, and the authorities likely wouldn’t do anything to help us. Octavio only understood the language of violence.

“That was a pretty fast move for a guy with a bum leg,” I said, swinging his axe around to chop off his right arm at the shoulder.

“Aaah!” Octavio screamed as he fell to the ground, clutching the wound where his arm once was. “My arm! Wh-what did you do?! I can’t, I can’t be an adventurer with one arm! You’ve ruined me…!”

Octavio started bawling as he cradled his cut-off arm with his other one.

“After that stunt? The arm’s just the beginning.” I said.

I threw the axe on the ground and drew my Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh. Octavio shrieked and abandoned his amputated arm before limping away, dragging his bad leg behind him.

As he disappeared around a bend in the road, I hoped that he finally got the message. I returned my sword to its sheath.

After cleaning up from our encounter with Octavio, Pomera and I got back to hunting iron cows. We managed to take down five without issue before dusk.

We brought the masks to the Guild and sold most of the meat as well. It was enough to bump us up to C-rank; we were now recognized as skilled adventurers. The news caused a stir as it made its way around the Guild. I saw Roy on the other side of the guild hall, his mouth open as he stared blankly at me.

Pomera and I decided to celebrate that evening. She suggested that we should splurge on a dinner at The Hunter's Kitchen. The inside of the tavern was decorated with monster skins and mounted heads. The atmosphere was nice, but the tavern's real gimmick was that they would only cook your dinner if you caught it first. We brought an iron cow's worth of meat with us.

I felt a real sense of accomplishment when the plate arrived. The steak was so large that it hung over the edges.

"Hee hee, Roy and Holly would come here without me. I always wanted to try this place," said Pomera happily. I silently wished I'd never hear those names again. "I didn't think the food would come with drinks, though."

Two beer-filled tankards had been placed on the table. This tavern gave patrons their first beer for free, with the expectation that most people wouldn't stop drinking after just one round.

I hadn't been a big fan of alcohol back in Japan. Being drunk just made me feel ill, so it wasn't particularly pleasant. But I had to admit that I was curious about the things people ate and drank in Locklore, and this was a perfect chance to try out.

"This is the first time I've been in a tavern—*and* my first time drinking alcohol! I'm so excited!" said Pomera. I didn't think she was twenty yet, but I also didn't think there was any sort of legal drinking age here. The server certainly didn't ask for ID.

"Take it slow—it's okay to leave the rest if you decide you don't like it," I said with an awkward smile as she chugged her beer.

Chapter 3:
The Evil Priest Notts
1

THE GOVERNOR'S MANSION—currently occupied by Lord Grand—stood at the very center of Arroburg. Easily the largest building in the city, it was surrounded by a high outer wall to ensure no prying eyes peered in to violate the lord's privacy. Guards patrolled the perimeter night and day.

Flanked by two of his subordinates, Grand stood facing a young man in a basement room. The youth had blueish-black hair, narrow eyes, and was handsome enough at a glance. But he exuded an aura that made most humans in his vicinity squirm with discomfort.

"N-Notts, have you finished preparations for the ritual?" asked Grand, and the humanoid dragon nodded. Notts paused for a moment before speaking.

"The stars have aligned and the silver thread bonding us to the astral plane grows thin. The lambs gather, and their spirits will be summoned before dawn. The girl who swallowed sand holds a withered branch. She will open her eyes again to sleep. Ideas have inherited the rust of an unsightly crown, but whose face is reflected in the returning blade? Our deepest desires—" Notts wove the words with his beautiful voice like some sort of arcane poem, but Grand had no idea what they meant.

Notts turned to Grand and his men, opening his narrow eyes and taking note of their confusion. The three shuddered as his gaze passed over them, each man breaking into a cold sweat that chilled their bodies to the bone.

One of them worked up the courage to whisper, "Lord Grand, perhaps you should reconsider—"

"There is no turning back now! This man will make me a king!" Nott's aura was powerful, but Grand's greed was stronger. His round, ugly face paled as he smiled.

"Have no fear of my metaphors, my lord—I forget myself around ordinary humans. Plainly put, I mean that preparations are complete. I must express my gratitude for your permission to use the city of Arroburg as the altar. For ages, I have longed to call upon my master and destroy the foolish, power-thirsty swine who have forsaken the true faith," said Notts, his mouth turning up in a small smile. "I have no desire for authority. I wish only to see the world returned to its intended order by the God of Terror. I assure you that you will ascend the throne, as promised."

"I-in that case, all is well! Yes, make it so… Ho ho, I will be king!" Grand chuckled quietly to himself, and his men glanced at him with unease.

"My lord, there is something I wish you to hear before my master returns," said Notts softly. "In the distant past—some five thousand years ago—the chaos wrought by the demon kings was so horrific that the current

state of the world seems idyllic by comparison. In their weakness, humanity prayed for salvation, and after generations of mewling prayers, a giant arose from the sea in answer. Images of her horrifying mask and writhing arms are recorded in murals and stone tablets. She was Zolophilia, the God of Terror.

"Zolophilia defeated the demon kings and brought peace to the people. But she also knew that without a common enemy, humanity would inevitably turn upon itself. So Zolophilia used her horrific mask to instill fear in men's hearts—a frightening leash to restrain the base instincts of humanity."

Grand smiled politely, disinterested in the history lesson. He daydreamed of the power he would soon wield. Notts continued:

"Yet…in its foolishness, humanity began to resent Zolophilia. My ancestors, the priests who devoted themselves to the God of Terror, were wiped out in a surprise attack, and Zolophilia was sealed away by the rulers of the very nations she had saved."

Notts's emotionless voice began to crack with anger. Grand was startled from his fantasies of power as the priest's aura intensified. Sweat dripped down Grand's face.

"But that was not enough for them. No! They distorted history; they sullied the name of my family. Zolophilia, the god who saved the world, was now called…*evil*! Even now, those who worship her are hunted down and cruelly tortured to death!"

The force of Notts's grip cracked the staff in his hands, and deep furrows of rage appeared across his face. Tears of anger streamed from the corners of his narrow eyes.

"Their sins will not be ignored! History will not repeat itself! In eons past, we were wrong to have been so kind! Humans are nothing more than greedy swine, ignorant of their own debt. We will grant authority only to the chosen few, and the rest will be treated as livestock! That is the only way to guide this world back to eternal enlightenment! Once Zolophilia awakes, true terror shall rule!"

Grand stood frozen in shock, his mouth agape. He knew that Notts meant to summon some horrible entity. He also knew that it would likely cost the lives of many of his subjects. But now he was confronted with the abject depravity of his decision to work with the humanoid dragon.

Notts tossed his broken staff to the ground, wiped his tears away with the sleeve of his robe, and smiled warmly.

"My lord, you do understand, don't you?"

Grand answered Notts's question with a glassy stare and two mechanical nods, like a marionette whose strings were being tugged.

2

POMERA AND I met up at the Guild the following morning to look at the request board and listen to the latest rumors. It seemed that Octavio had left the city…for some unknown reason. We weren't the only people happy to see him go. The word on the street was that another group of people even tried to ambush him on his way out, and he barely escaped with his life. We weren't implicated in any of the circulating gossip, which was a relief.

"The C-rank requests seem really profitable, Kanata!" said Pomera, with a quick glance toward me.

"Y-yeah…" I couldn't help looking away from her.

"Wh-why won't you look me in the face? I don't remember much about dinner last night—just waking up in my bed this morning. D-did I do something rude?"

"You don't remember?"

Pomera jumped a little at my words and squeezed her staff in embarrassment. "S-so I did do something…"

"Let's forget about it."

"What did I do?!"

Pomera couldn't hold her liquor. At all. She might've been the worst drunk I'd ever met.

Having tried a little of the free beer the tavern gave us, I decided it was too strong for my taste—but Pomera showed no restraint. I should have stopped her after she chugged her third beer in a row. She even grabbed what was left of my beer and drank it while telling me in slurred speech that she wasn't going to let it go to waste.

Then I ended up on the receiving end of some drunk harassment as she hung on my back and stroked my head while saying she wanted to see me drunk. One thing led to another, and she pulled out her staff and started casting a spell. I panicked and put her to sleep with magic.

"…Just don't worry about it, okay?" I tried in vain.

"P-please tell me! What did I do?!" she persisted. I forced a smile and made a noncommittal shrug, but her face just paled even more. I made a mental note to cut her off after her second beer in the future.

Then we heard a scream from outside, and a man raced into the Guild.

"The sky's turned a strange color! It's like uh, fuchsia…maybe magenta…but it's really weird!"

Chaos erupted in the Guild as everyone tried to get to a window or door to look.

"Is this something that happens often?" I asked Pomera, but she shook her head. We left the Guild to see for ourselves.

The sky had indeed turned magenta. It wasn't the beautiful kind of purple you might see at sunset—it looked artificial. Everyone in the street had stopped to stare up in awe.

I saw a large hawk flying in the distance, and the strange color seemed to tint the bird like an overlay.

"Maybe…it's not the sky? Some sort of light around the city…?"

As I stood there confused, I soon realized that the crowd's racket was steadily getting quieter. The people around me were starting to lean against walls and slump to the ground.

What the hell's going on?

It was obvious to me now that this wasn't a natural phenomenon. As I looked on, I began to hear the cries of the suffering townspeople.

"I-it hurts… I c-can't raise my arms…"

"I'm so cold…"

"What is this…?" I asked, turning to Pomera.

"K-Kanata, you don't feel anything at all? It feels like my health is being sucked away…"

No way, I thought as I checked my own status. Both my HP and MP were slowly being depleted. It was such a tiny fraction of my overall total that I couldn't feel it, but there was no doubt that it was dropping.

I gulped. Whatever this magic was, it was powerful enough to get through the protection of Lunaère's robe.

I looked up at the sky again, and it finally hit me. "It's barrier magic…"

There was a giant barrier surrounding the entire city, draining the life and magic of everyone in Arroburg. Even Lunaère couldn't pull off a spell this massive without preparation.

The caster had to be close by. They also had to be incredibly strong if they were confident enough to attack an entire city. This wasn't a poseur like Lovis, this was the work of an actual high-level magic user. I tried to remember the name I'd seen on that bright-red wanted poster.

"We have to evacuate…" I started to say. Then I saw a child leaning against a wall. He was limp from the pain, and his crying mother was trying to lift him back to his feet. At this rate, the common people of Arroburg were going to waste away and die before they could make it to the city gates. They wouldn't survive if we didn't put a stop to this soon.

We could try to take out the barrier, but there were most likely items throughout the city supporting the spell. Destroying them might weaken it a little, but it wouldn't nullify the whole thing.

No. I needed to defeat the caster. That was the only way.

"It's okay. I can handle this," I said, taking a deep breath to reassure myself as much as anyone around me.

Lunaère had expected that I would run into serious threats. She trained me to fight against other magic users, particularly legitimately dangerous ones. Even if it was that humanoid dragon, I should be able to handle the fight.

At the very least, I was certainly the strongest person in the Adventurers' Guild. I'd never forgive myself if I abandoned these people. I had to act, but I wasn't confident that I could do it in time to save everyone.

"Pomera-san, is there anywhere the people can gather during an emergency?" I asked.

"Huh? S-somewhere the people can gather?"

"Like if there's a natural disaster or monster attack. Is there a rally point?"

"Umm…the church?"

I took my map out of my magic bag and unfurled it. The church was fairly near the center of Arroburg. That seemed as good a place as any.

I pulled another magic bag out of my main magic bag. I couldn't use Dimension Pocket in public, and a single magic bag couldn't hold that much—so my inventory was magic bags all the way down. This one contained healing potions and elixirs.

I handed the bag to Pomera.

"K-Kanata…?"

"Pomera-san, I need your help. I need you to go to the church and destroy whatever is holding up the barrier there. Heal the injured and take them along with you as you go."

At heart, Pomera was a white mage. She could cast Raphael's Tears, a level 11 spell that could heal nearly any injury or disease. She could also cast Healing Rain and restore the health of everyone in a large area. After the past week of training, the white magic she could use far surpassed any healing I could do.

I was worried that the barrier would sap her MP, so I loaded her down with a few more elixirs to keep herself topped off.

"You mean *I* should gather the people…? I-I'm not sure I can do that…" she said anxiously.

She might seem like a timid girl, but Pomera could be courageous if she thought it would help others. She'd bravely called the guards when Octavio harassed me and shown me around town even though she risked making Roy angry. She'd even faced the demonic horrors inside the Cursed Mirror. I believed she had the strength to be a real leader, but first she had to believe in herself.

“Pomera-san, if there’s anyone who can do this, it’s you.”

She was hesitant, but my words seemed to give her resolve. Pomera took a breath and said, “O-okay… I’ll do it!”

Her knuckles whitened as she squeezed her staff tightly. I nodded in encouragement.

“I’m going to find whoever cast this spell and stop them,” I said, but I had no idea where they were hiding. Not a single clue. Maybe I could narrow down their location if I knew their motive, but even that was a mystery.

“Um… H-how do I destroy parts of the barrier? I don’t know anything about barrier magic…”

“For a spell this big, there must be items stabilizing it. Probably a lot of them, placed in regular intervals around the city. They shouldn’t be hard to find if we just had time. If you can’t find them…well, just do your best. Lead the people and heal as many as you can…”

“Th-there should be lots of them… How could someone do all that preparation without the guards noticing?”

That was a good point. There would have surely been rumors if someone had been skulking around town doing preparations like that. It’s not like they could have done it under everyone’s noses…

“…Oh.”

There was somebody, or rather *somebodies* who could have done it—the people in black robes. I’d thought they were working on some sort of barrier to keep monsters at bay.

“Those black-robed magic users were doing something to the city walls! Destroy the spots where they were gathering! Tell everyone else too!” I said.

“But they work for Lord Grand! No one’s going to believe me if I tell them!” said Pomera, panicking.

That would probably change if she healed them. Still, we didn’t have time to dawdle, and those were the clues we had to work with. Magic users working for Lord Grand prepared the barrier. The guards clearly weren’t suspicious of their work. If that was the case, it was obvious that Grand was involved. That meant it was likely that the caster was hiding out in Grand’s mansion. And the red fliers for the humanoid dragon were taken down on Lord Grand’s orders… It was all coming together.

I spread out the map and looked at the city’s center.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go! I think I know where the caster is!”

3

I RAN UP to Lord Grand's mansion alone, vaulting over the exterior wall and kicking down the front door.

It looked like my hunch was correct.

An evil aura radiated from somewhere below the floor, and the effect was so strong here that even I could feel it. This was the full force of the spell, not the weaker area of effect that had been extended with the assistance of items and ritual.

Unexpectedly, there was nothing in place to keep the barrier from affecting people inside the mansion. The rooms were littered with the fallen bodies of guards, blackened and dried. They were already dead, their life force completely drained by the spell. I also saw bodies wearing the familiar black robes.

What happened here? They even sacrificed their own people...

I searched through the mansion and found a door left half-open to stairs leading deep underground. I knew the person behind this must be waiting at the bottom. I walked down the steps as quietly as I could before throwing open the lower door; I hoped to take them by surprise. Inside was a large room with magic formulas carved into every inch of the walls, ceiling, and floor. There were also two men in the room.

No, just one. The other was already dead.

On the floor lay the corpse of a fat man dressed in opulent clothing. His hair was falling out, as were his eyes, and his skin had taken on the appearance of black rubber. A look of terror was frozen on his face.

"I see you've met Lord Grand," said the other man casually.

Notts. Evil Priest Notts... This is the humanoid dragon from that poster!

Sure enough, he had the same handsome face that I'd seen on the bright-red flyer. In real life, his hair was actually dark blueish-black, and he wore a brightly colored robe of red and green. He held a skull-shaped crystal in his hand.

"I hadn't thought a human could survive the journey into the center of my Sacrifice spell," he said.

Drawing the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, I pointed the blade toward Notts. "I thought you and Grand were working together?"

"His contribution was appreciated. Without him, I wouldn't have been able assemble the proper offering, at the proper coordinates, under the proper constellations." Notts opened his eyes slightly and looked coldly down at Grand. "But is a man who would betray his own subjects really fit to be king?"

Notts smiled slightly as he crunched his foot into Grand's ribcage. I noticed that some of the red on his robe was splattered blood.

“Quite pathetic, really. He remained clueless until the bitter end. But such is the fate of swine—a life of greed and excess, ended with a quick and merciful slaughter.”

I shuddered. I wasn’t sure what had gone on here, but this meeting wasn’t going to end with a chat and a handshake.

It was important to know what I was up against. I focused on Notts, hoping I could use Status Check while he was making his grand speech over Grand’s corpse.

Instead, Notts raised the skull-shaped crystal in my direction.

“Whatever you were about to do, it would have been pointless. You should sleep…forever,” said Notts. “Death Magic Level 8: Heart Eater.”

Black mist gathered to form a monster with a gaping mouth. It flew toward me, but I didn’t dodge. The black mist struck me and dissipated. Notts’s narrow eyes opened wide as he watched me stand there, unharmed.

“You defended against Heart Eater? No matter. You can’t possibly block against all my spells.”

“My robe has the power to deflect all low-level attack spells. Please just stop,” I said.

“Bah. There’s no item in the world that can defend against *all* spells level 8 and below. Wait! Something is amiss… Oh, I see. The reason Sacrifice reached its full potential so quickly is because you entered the mansion. You’ll be the instrument of your own doom! Space-Time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket.”

Letting the crystal skull fall to the floor, he reached in and withdrew a shining jade staff.

“It seems I must use my full strength for the first time in centuries. I had hoped to avoid the gaze of those above, but I am faced with a trial before the ceremony!” Notts swung his staff in my direction. “Death Magic Level 10: Death!”

A large magic circle appeared in the center of the room, surrounded by floating skulls of purple light. What remained of Grand’s body rotted away, and every surface of the room began to age rapidly.

“I once killed a hundred soldiers with a single cast of this spell!” cried Notts. His breathing grew heavy and deep furrows formed on his brow. “But how…how do you just stand there?!”

“My robe has the power to deflect all low-level attack spells,” I said again, repeating each word slowly. If it wasn’t advanced magic, it wasn’t getting through Lunaère’s Robe.

Notts’s Sacrifice spell must have fit that description. While he might be able to cast a level 11 or 12 spell after a lengthy ritual, he couldn’t cast one in the heat of battle.

Readying my sword, I rushed toward the evil priest while using Status Check.

NOTTS NIGRADE

Race: Human

Lv: 375
HP: 1613/1613
MP: 944/1800

Notts wasn't even level 400!

"Th-this is impossible! I can't be stopped! My duty to Zolophilia demands that I guide the world!" he shrieked.

I swung my sword, shattering the dropped crystal skull and making a spiderweb of cracks in the floor. The crystal skull was the heart of what held the Sacrifice spell together—without it, the citizens of Arroburg shouldn't lose any more of their health.

"No! We stand on the threshold of a new world, and I am the last of the Nigrade line…" Notts fell and struck the floor with his fists before looking up at me, his breathing ragged.

"There's no way these people will be able to keep you contained. I don't know why you're doing this, but you're just too dangerous to let go… I'll have to kill you," I said, raising the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh.

"You don't know why I've done this? Ha! Ha ha! Aha ha ha!"

"What's so funny?"

"It is unfortunate that I won't be able to fulfill my duties as a priest, but my life is of little consequence now. Sacrifice was nothing more than a vessel to gather the magic necessary to cast an even *stronger* spell…" giggled Notts.

Is he just acting tough? No, he thinks he has something up his sleeve.

"Before you arrived, I used that concentrated power to cast Nirvana. You even donated a good bit of your own magic power! Even now, Zolophilia—once sealed away by the stupidity and sins of humanity—is emerging into this world." His crazed eyes opened wide, and his mouth curled into a malicious smile as his rant went on.

"No one can stop her now! Zolophilia will show no mercy. She will fill this world with terror! Ha ha ha! She awakens! Freed from her imprisonment, she will end the world as you know it! At last, my people's deepest wish will be granted! My death is nothing compared to that!"

The room began to shake, and the evil aura grew more intense. I realized now that it hadn't been coming from Notts.

"Aah! She's here, she's here, she's here! Here, here, here! Zolophilia!" Notts chanted, then trailed off into frantic laughter.

"…Play," came an ominously ethereal voice, echoing from the depths of the earth. "Let's…play."

From the corner of my eye, I saw something appear behind me.

It was a giant crimson-and-jade mask. Nearly three meters tall, it seemed to be made of a layered, bark-like material. Spiral patterns swirled around hollow eyes that opened wide on each side.

Behind the mask was a disgusting lump of flesh, the same jade green as the mask. I couldn't tell if it was plant or animal in origin, but countless

tentacles reached out of the mass. They also appeared plantlike, but something about their shape suggested the form of human arms and legs.

"Wh-what the hell…?" I gasped.

"Zolophilia! Our beautiful god! To think I am blessed to see her with my own eyes! She's so…! Oh, Mother, Father, my humiliated ancestors—I-I've done it!" Notts stood, his arms wrapped around himself as he wept and prayed to the creature.

Is this guy for real?

I was dumbstruck by Notts's strange excitement but more so by Zolophilia's strange appearance. That was when her tentacles stretched out to attack me.

I was too slow. Swinging the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, I managed to cut off some of the tentacles as I leaped back. But like a flash, others snapped forward to wrap around my legs.

"Let's…play, let's…play…"

"Oof!"

Zolophilia swung me around, and my back smacked into a wall, buckling the stone. She kept going, bouncing me off each of the four walls in turn. Twisting, I tried to cut the tentacles, and Zolophilia let go of me mid-swing. I flew into a wall, which collapsed on impact. I was nearly crushed by the falling rubble.

"Aah ha ha ha ha! Zolophilia has delivered me from death! My beloved God of Terror! Today I fulfill the purpose of my birth! Zolophilia, return this human-warped world to its proper state!"

Notts was still laughing and ranting as I pushed aside the debris and crawled out.

"Let's…play…" Zolophilia's giant mask was suddenly right in front of me.

"You must be around level 2,000," I muttered. Then I slashed horizontally with all my strength. The blade sliced through the mask, creating a deep gouge. The surface split, and dozens of Zolophilia's tentacles fell like cut leaves.

"AAAH!" Zolophilia shrieked as she was thrown into the air from the impact of my strike. She crashed into the ceiling, opening a massive hole and leaving the floor littered with fragments of her shattered appendages.

“Ah ha ha ha ha…wha?” Notts’s eyes followed Zolophilia up through the ceiling, and then he turned to look at me in amazement.

Her first attack took me by surprise, but now I knew the truth—Zolophilia was a weak opponent. Despite her unsettling appearance, she wasn’t any weirder or tougher than the demons in the Cursed Mirror.

“I’ve fought stronger monsters in Cocytus. You don’t live up to your name, God of Terror,” I said.

Zolophilia writhed in agony on the floor above us.

“Let’s, let’s…let’s…play…”

She might have been weak to me, but I knew that she was unthinkably strong compared to the citizens of Arroburg. Unless I finished this quickly, she might destroy the entire town.

ZOLOPHILIA
Race: Heart of Dreams
Lv: 1800
HP: 3211/8100
MP: 8100/8100

Turns out I was right, she was just shy of level 2,000—but I’d never heard of a race called *Heart of Dreams*. I wondered what that was about.

“Shocking!” Notts sputtered as he limped around the edges of the rubble, watching the battle unfold. “To think Zolophilia would need to remove her shackles and choose another form! This hasn’t happened for 5,000 years.”

“Oh, ooh, oooh…” came her eerie moan from above.

Through the broken ceiling, I could see that Zolophilia was growing.

“It is absurd that Zolophilia would recognize a single human not as a subject—or even something to be idly destroyed—but as an actual threat! She is no longer playing… Ha ha! The fact that you have a modicum of strength means you will truly know terror!” shrieked Notts.

What the heck is Zolophilia? She’s not a demon. Maybe some sort of god, but she’s not anything like Naiarotop.

I leaped from the floor of the basement, up through the hole in the ceiling. It looked like we were in a ballroom. A chandelier sparkled overhead, and a raised dais meant for musical performances was situated along the far wall.

Zolophilia’s mask shrank, and her body elongated until she nearly filled the room. Before, she had been a disgusting mass of organs and flesh, but now she took on the form of a dragon. Huge wings unfurled from her back, and wicked claws dug ruts into the ballroom floor. The ceiling was over five meters high, but her back scraped against it in places.

If her shape changed, did her stats change too?

ZOLOPHILIA
Race: Heart of Dreams
Lv: 2141
HP: 4746/9635

MP: 6952/9635

H-her level jumped?!

Even as I checked, her level climbed steadily as her new body grew thicker and tougher. It seemed impossible. Nothing could gain levels without earning experience first. Except…

Lunaère had explained the nature of levels and experience to me once. When I killed another living thing in this world, I absorbed a portion of its soul into my own and that made me a little more powerful. But if something could manipulate the power of its own soul, it might be able to increase its own level at will. I didn't know how high Zolophilia could go, but it was obvious that I had to end this as quickly as possible.

"Ooooh!"

I leaped back as Zolophilia slashed out with her claws, barely evading the attack. The floorboards splintered where I had just been, and the entire room shook, knocking paintings off the walls and dropping the chandelier.

Her claws came at me from every direction, and the attacks grew steadily in force.

I lunged forward and slashed with my sword, sending one of Zolophilia's limbs flying off. It regenerated; but as it did, the severed arm shriveled and dissolved into a pile of multicolored sand.

Zolophilia raised her new arm high and brought it down with a vicious slam. I stood firm and counterattacked, opening a gaping wound that healed as I feinted to avoid another strike.

It was hard to land effective hits on an opponent with regenerative abilities and such a long reach. I didn't know where Zolophilia's weak spots were, so I tried to put some space between us to cast a spell.

Then Zolophilia swung her gigantic forked tail. I was taken by surprise but managed to bring my sword up to defend against the blow. I rewrote my magic circle on the fly to deal with the situation at hand.

"Space-Time Magic Level 12: Slow World!"

I was surrounded by a purple sphere of light about three meters across. Time inside the sphere slowed down, softening the impact of her strike against my sword and allowing me to land feet first on the opposite wall. I let the spell end as I slid to a halt.

Notts staggered into the room. He looked up at Zolophilia, mouth agape.

"Th-that form… Is that the First Dragon Drigvesha?! Zolophilia, must you go this far for victory? Why, why…why? How is this human still standing? Drigvesha is said to have been the most powerful creature in existence!"

Good grief… I thought. Even amid a raging battle, Notts found time to give history lessons. I wondered if he'd truly known how dangerous Zolophilia was when he summoned her.

"Groooo!"

Zolophilia rushed toward me, but I had enough time to cast a spell. Since coming to Arroburg, I'd mostly been melee fighting to hide my real abilities, but in this fight, I couldn't afford to pull any more punches. It was time for a magical haymaker.

"Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse!"

I pointed my sword, and a crimson dragon launched from the magic circle, bathing the entire room in flames. The red dragon laid waste to the walls and floor as it sped toward the God of Terror.

"Ooo—aaaagh!"

Zolophilia was engulfed in flames. She fell to her knees, and I used the Twin-Minds Method to cast my second spell.

"Space-Time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb!"

Shining darkness filled the space. It lifted the massive bulk of Zolophilia—still burning—and drew her into the center of the singularity before crushing her torso when it collapsed. I closed in and struck with two diagonal slashes for good measure.

Zolophilia's mangled body fell to the ground in pieces that began to fade and disappear, filling the room with multicolored sand. Her mask floated in the air, shrinking.

"That…that was Drigvesha! How?! There's nothing left! My people… the new world… Aah! This cannot be!" Notts cradled his head and wept while crouching on the ground.

Something weird was going on. Well, it was already pretty weird, but it was getting *even weirder*. Just what exactly was Zolophilia?

I scooped up a handful of the multicolored sand that was filling the room and pulled the Acacia Memoirs from my magic bag.

SAND OF DREAMS

Value Class: Godly

Created five thousand years ago by a family of royal alchemists. It is said they melted down a god-created shield owned by an otherworldly traveler and infused it with other key ingredients to make the sand. Comprised of the materials that built the universe, it was the ultimate alchemical catalyst. The Sand of Dreams responds to desire and has the power to make any wish come true.

However, the sand is fickle and cannot be controlled. A merchant who wished for riches was turned into a statue of gold. A hero who desired power was transformed into a hideous beast. Use with caution.

Is this what Zolophilia is made of?!

If that were the case, then the fact that she could change form meant that the sand was wishing on its own. But the Acacia Memoirs didn't mention anything about self-awareness…

It suddenly hit me. Zolophilia's race was listed as *Heart of Dreams*, not *Sand of Dreams*. That led me to a chilling hypothesis, and I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Don’t tell me they fed the Sand of Dreams a person!” I said.

“To be more precise, Zolophilia is a homunculus: a creature born from alchemy using a human as its base material. They used a curse to seal away the martyr’s free will and personality so that she could live eternally as the God of Terror,” said Notts as he crouched in the corner.

“How could they do something so horrible?”

“My ancestors did only what was necessary—and we were betrayed! Thousands of years have passed, and I have kindled the light of a new era, only for this…*this* to happen!” Notts gestured angrily at the ruins of the ballroom while veins throbbed in his temples.

Just then, I felt the evil presence begin to rise again.

“Oh, give me a break!” I whined. I’d let my guard down, assuming that I had won. Wasn’t slaying a dragon-god enough to end this fight? I gawked at the new form of Zolophilia taking shape in the center of the room.

She was*…me.*

I looked across at a copy of myself, perfect in almost every detail except for Zolophilia’s trademark mask covering my…no, *her* face. The doppelganger raised her arm, and I saw the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh gripped in her hand.

“Zolophilia… Y-you believe that a *human* is the most powerful form for defeating your enemies?!”

She lunged toward me, unleashing a flurry of slashes. I parried each one with my sword, and on the fifth strike, I managed to shatter her sword. As she withdrew, I used the opening to slice off both of her hands at the wrists.

I guess *I* was the best version of me after all. The copy of my sword couldn’t stand up to the real Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, and my stats were still higher, even if she could boost her own. In the end, she was just a cheap copy of the genuine article.

“Aaah…” groaned Zolophilia as she looked down at her stumps.

“Please, just go back to wherever you came from. I don’t want to fight you,” I said.

“Aaah!” Zolophilia’s hands regrew, and she pointed a finger at me, croaking out, “…G-gravity B-bomb…”

This was a new development; I didn’t expect her to start using my own spells against me. But Gravity Bomb was a tough spell to cast. The magic circle was very complicated, and it left her open to attack from anything in melee range.

I struck at Zolophilia without hesitation, cleaving her upper body completely away from her waist and legs. It was unsettling to watch both halves collapse to the floor.

“I hope I never have to chop myself in half again.”

I spoke too soon. Dissolving back into the multicolored Sand of Dreams, Zolophilia formed four more masked copies of me.

“Oh, come on!”

Three of them rushed in to attack with their swords. I defended, evaded, and parkoured off the walls and floor as I ran, desperately seeking an opening to counterattack. No matter what, I couldn’t let them pin me down because the fourth doppelganger was pointing a finger at me from afar, waiting for her moment to cast Gravity Bomb.

I steadied my breathing and counterattacked viciously with my sword while simultaneously creating a magic circle. It was times like this that I was really happy Lunaère had insisted on teaching me the Twin-Minds Method. Being able to split my concentration wasn’t limited to magic; I could also focus on something physical while I cast spells with my off hand. I was eventually able to maneuver the three melee Zolophilias into one spot as my spell neared completion. From across the room, it looked like the caster was almost finished with her spell too.

Gravity Bomb was incoming. I hoped that my timing was perfect.

“Space-Time Magic Level 12: Slow World.”

I closed the three melee doppelgangers inside the purple bubble of Slow World while I backed away from the sphere. Then the black light of Zolophilia’s Gravity Bomb started to fill the area.

“Space-Time Magic Level 4: Short Gate.”

I teleported away right before I was caught by the spell. The three copies weren’t so lucky—they were crushed. While she was distracted, I did a quick Status Check to see what sort of nonsense I was still up against.

ZOLOPHILIA
Race: Heart of Dreams
Lv: 3122
HP: 2746/14049
MP: 952/14049

Even Zolophilia had her limits, it seemed. The copies must have shared their HP and MP pools, and the self-inflicted Gravity Bomb took the wind out of her sails. She raised her sword, shoulders heaving with ragged breath—but I had a spell ready to go.

“Space-Time Magic Level 20: Karma Breaker.”

I pointed the Heroic Sword Gilgamesh at Zolophilia, and a pure white light encased the last doppelganger. Karma Breaker attacked with holy light, but its biggest effect was that it removed any status effects or curses on the target.

Long ago, Zolophilia’s personality had been taken from her with a curse to turn her into the God of Terror. She must have spent every moment since then lost in fear and confusion. Thousands of years, if Notts was telling the truth. I couldn’t turn her back into a human, but I hoped I could at least give her some peace during her final moments.

Inside the light, Zolophilia’s arms and legs started to fade and disappear. Her mask shattered, and I saw a face underneath that looked like mine, but with an innocent, childlike expression.

“Play…” she mumbled as her eyes slowly closed in a peaceful sleep. As the light faded away, Zolophilia faded with it.

Grand’s mansion had finally reached the limit of its structural integrity. The walls and ceiling began to crumble, dropping beams and other debris across the tattered remnants of the ballroom floor.

“Aaah… Zolophilia! Zolophiliaaaaa! My beloved God of Terror!” screamed Notts, throwing himself to the ground where she had vanished.

“Time to go!” I said to myself as I leapt through a window. Once outside, I looked back to see Notts still prone on the ballroom floor. I wasn’t sure if he didn’t notice the building collapsing around him or if he just didn’t care.

“You could use some peace too.”

I turned away and left him in the doomed mansion while I made my escape.

4

THE NEXT MORNING, Arroburg was still recovering from the chaos of the previous day.

Searching the ruins of Grand's mansion after the fight, I had managed to pick up a…tagalong. The little girl was my shadow as I walked through the city searching for Pomera.

She hadn't returned to her room the previous night, and I was getting worried. I headed down to the guildhall to see if she was there.

"The Guild ain't running today," said a bald, brawny adventurer as I approached the entrance.

"Yeah, thanks. It's just that I got separated from my partner and thought she might be here…" I bowed slightly. The little girl tried to imitate my motions with a small bow of her own.

"Thank…you!" she said. Even the tough guy cracked a grin at her cute thanks.

"Hey, brother—I know the Guild is basically shut down, but it still ain't the kind of place to bring a kid."

"Sorry…I think she got lost in all the trouble yesterday. I, uh, can't really leave her alone." I said, forcing a smile as I went into the guildhall.

Pomera was slumped over a table in the lounge area.

She looks beat…

"K-Kanata?" Light returned to her eyes.

"You must be exhausted," I said, taking the seat across from her. She looked like she hadn't slept. I started to feel guilty about going back to my room instead of searching for her.

"S-so…what happened after you left yesterday?" she asked.

"The rumors are true. The Evil Priest Notts was working with Lord Grand."

Pomera flinched when she heard Notts's name. "R-really? Notts was in the city…? That's, that's…"

"Yeah. But I defeated him…kind of. The fight destroyed the mansion, and he was still in the mansion."

Pomera's eyes grew wide with shock. The signs of fatigue vanished from her face.

"B-but there's barely a scratch on you!"

When I'd used Status Check on Notts, I noticed that his race was listed as Human. That made me suspicious that *humanoid dragon* might be more of a job description than an actual race, so I checked a few of Lunaère's books before I fell asleep. I learned that humanoid dragons got their title based either on their level or the destruction caused by their plans. Notts must've been the dangerous-plan sort, not the high-level sort.

Before last night, I'd worried that my level was grossly overpowered. Everyone else seemed so low by comparison, even Notts. But after fighting

Zolophilia, I knew that Lunaère was right—there were some truly high-level dangers kicking around Locklore. I couldn't let my guard down.

"You act like it was nothing…" said Pomera, staring at me with her mouth open in amazement. Then she looked over. "And…who's this?"

The little girl had hopped up on the bench to sit next to me while we spoke. She looked about ten years old, and her hair was twisted into two buns on either side of her head, one pale green and the other a light pink.

"Let's play!" she chattered, clinging to my arm while she looked around the guildhall with an innocent smile. Even the hardened adventurers in the room couldn't help but smile back at her.

"Well, it's complicated…" I started, then facepalmed while letting out a sigh.

How could I explain that she was the Heart of Dreams, cursed five thousand years ago by Notts's ancestors to create the God of Terror? The little girl was Zolophilia.

As I left Grand's crumbling mansion the night before, I noticed her standing behind me. I'd hoped I was just seeing things, but Status Check confirmed that it was her and that she was still level 1,800. Zolophilia had used the Sand of Dreams to recreate her original body.

I thought Karma Breaker had killed her, but I guess I still had trouble casting a level 20 spell and keeping it stable. She'd reverted to her former personality and was so sweet that I didn't have the heart to try to kill her again—even if she was the most powerful person I'd run into on the surface.

I patted Zolophilia's head, and she seemed to enjoy it. She laid her head on the table and closed her eyes.

"Y-you're looking after a lost child?" asked Pomera hesitantly. "Why don't you let the church take care of her once things have calmed down a bit? They're looking after any orphans from all this mess."

I wished it were that easy—but what if she threw a tantrum and destroyed the city in the process? Or maybe Zolophilia would end up massacring people just trying to play a game with them. What if she was kidnapped? Someone could try to use her for evil ends.

"The priests don't happen to be level 3,000 or so, do they?" I asked.

"What?! Kanata, are you okay? You didn't get hit with some weird spell from Notts, did you?"

"I didn't think so…" I said glumly.

I knew the church wasn't an option, but I was still disappointed. Until I found a high-level person who I could also trust to act like a parent, she was mine to look after. Level 1,800 or not, she was still a child at heart.

I stroked Philia's head to calm her while listening to Pomera—I'd decided that Zolophilia was too much of a mouthful.

"Yesterday was really tough…" Pomera said.

She had worn herself out healing and guiding the townspeople. Even after Notts's Sacrifice spell collapsed, she continued to act as a leader until she nearly collapsed herself. There was still a lot of cleaning up to do, but

she finally hit her limit. I suspected that she apologized to everyone she could before she left the church.

"In the end, the barrier spell just…stopped. There were rumors about Notts, but no one actually saw him. Except you," said Pomera with a sigh.

That sounded about right. Aside from rumors, no one in town had any idea that Notts and Grand were working together. Between the Sacrifice spell that had killed all of their followers in the mansion and the collapse of the mansion itself, there wasn't much left in the way of evidence or witnesses.

And since the Guild was administrated by the local lord, it was pretty much shut down for the time being. A distant relative of Grand's was going to be coming in as a substitute, but nobody knew how long that might take. Until then, the hall was still open for adventurers to hang out, but no requests were being posted. I heard a few idle adventurers talking about moving on to other cities.

"I barely slept last night… I never thought I'd end up drinking a sleep replacement elixir unless you made me," complained Pomera.

"But you worked really hard and did a lot of good. People had to notice that, right?"

"Yeah…" said Pomera, her expression showing mixed feelings. "Maybe I'm expecting too much, but I feel like things have changed. It would be nice if I could make some equal friends, but…"

"But?"

"Well…everyone's treating me like a hero now, which kind of makes me uncomfortable. I'm sorry, I shouldn't complain."

"But you are a hero!"

"Yeah…I was running around the city looking for weakened people, casting Healing Rain and using elixirs to raise my magic. The people who saw me thought I had unlimited magic. Then they started cheering me on. And when the barrier was destroyed, people acted like I was the one who did it. They kept calling me a saint…" Pomera's shoulders fell before she continued. "It's the exact opposite from before, but they're still not seeing the real me… I-I don't know what to do."

Pomera scrunched herself up smaller.

"That's rough. It sounds like you got famous, whether you like it or not. Just make sure you get to know people before you get close to them." I said.

"Get close to the people I know… Maybe you're right," Pomera murmured as she gave a little nod.

"I mean, be careful. Not everyone who recognizes you will have your best interest at heart. Some will try to take advantage of the bad attitudes about elves to force their agendas. Other people might act friendly to try to get something from you. They might seem charming, but they're bad news." I said and then took a drink of water. Pomera wore a troubled expression.

“Maybe we should try going somewhere else for a while,” I continued. “I know you wanted to reduce the prejudice against elves here, but I think the way you helped yesterday might have done a lot to make that happen. And Lord Grand is dead now, so he won’t be around to drum up any more hate. We could make a fresh start somewhere else. A place where you could make friends with a blank slate.”

“I-I’ll think about it…” Pomera nodded slightly.

I didn’t want to bum her out. It was amazing that Pomera found the courage and strength to save Arroburg in its moment of need, but we had to have a frank discussion about what might happen next. Some self-centered jerk like Roy was bound to try to take advantage of her. Better to have her a little disappointed now than let her get wrapped up in someone’s scheme because she was naive.

“P-Pomera! No… *Saint* Pomera! I knew I’d find you here!”

Speak of the devil. I felt my expression darken.

“R-Roy, it’s been a while.” said Pomera with a tiny bow.

“I’m so sorry I was such an idiot! Please forgive us! When I heard about how you rushed around the city protecting people, it made me realize how poorly we treated you!” he said through crocodile tears as he bowed low.

Pomera looked at the back of his head with narrowed eyes.

I wasn’t impressed with his act either. Pomera always tried to find reasons to stand up for Roy, but he was a real tool.

“It’s fine… I don’t really care,” said Pomera.

“Oh, how kind—especially after I was so horrible to you! Let me atone. Join me as a true companion, and let’s adventure together!”

“No, thank you,” was all Pomera said in return.

“Wha…? Y-you’re still mad, aren’t you? Please, Pomera! I’m begging you to forgive me! I can’t move on if I don’t make it up to you!” Her silent treatment caused cracks to form in Roy’s facade. “I thought you liked me, Pomera. Isn’t that why you were so obedient? Right?!”

Pomera looked around in distress, and after a moment’s hesitation, she grabbed my hand.

“I’m in Kanata’s party now! So, no, thank you. And I never thought much of you at all, Roy!” said Pomera.

“Wh-what?!” Roy’s face twisted in anger.

“Let’s go, Kanata. We don’t need to stay here any longer, now that we’ve met up,” said Pomera as she pulled my arm. I gently shook Philia’s shoulder to wake her before Pomera dragged both of us from the guildhall. Roy stared after us, his face bright red.

5

As KANATA FACED OFF against the Evil Priest Notts, Lunaère sat surrounded by a pile of books. In front of her was a dark bolt of cloth, and she was carefully painting magic symbols across the fabric with red pigment.

Noble awoke from a nap and gently stretched his hinges.

"Shouldn't you take a break, Lady?"

Two weeks had passed since Noble brought up the possibility of Kanata finding love on the surface. Since then, Lunaère spent sleepless nights searching for a way to reduce the effects of her unholy aura. She read through every magic book she owned and wandered the floors of Cocytus, killing monsters and collecting items for her research. She'd killed so many monsters that Noble quietly worried that she might be upsetting the dungeon's ecosystem.

Every day, she forced herself to focus on continuing her work, drinking enough elixir to float a boat. But even a lich had her limits—bags had formed under her eyes, and her mental fatigue caused her to call Kanata's name on the rare occasions she dozed off.

Noble was a little shocked. It had taken less pestering than he expected to convince her to leave Cocytus. He even began to regret putting the idea into her head—her obsession was getting scary. Even scarier was the thought of what she'd do if Kanata managed to snag a girlfriend before Lunaère caught up. He wanted her to find happiness, but he didn't want to be the treasure chest standing between Lunaère and a jealous rampage.

"No need to rush," said Noble, imagining the carnage.

Years ago, Lunaère had developed the theoretical background for a process to dampen the impurity, but she never put it into practice. It was research for research's sake, just something to pass the time until another piece of research became more interesting. In truth, she never actually entertained thoughts of going outside until she met Kanata. After she hunted down all her old notes, trying to pick up where she left off, Noble worried that she was trying to cram a century of work into a few weeks.

"You're a smart girl. Don't worry, you'll get it eventually. Until then…" he trailed off.

Lunaère looked at Noble and nodded slightly.

"Oh, thank the gods! You're finally being—" started Noble.

"It's finished."

"Huh?"

"If I make an Impurity Sealing Robe with this cloth, I should be able to reduce the effects of the aura by 80 percent," she said, spreading and smoothing the cloth. "It will seal my magic too, so I might not be that strong, but…I can go see Kanata!"

Her voice was filled with excitement and uncertainty. Even she seemed surprised to have finished the project so quickly.

"Wh-what do I do now? It's done, but won't I just be bothering Kanata if I go running after him?" She looked restlessly at Noble.

She seemed to be asking his permission, but Noble was pretty sure she was going to do whatever she wanted regardless of his opinion. He thought this was her best shot at happiness, but it was also a big risk of heartbreak. He managed to swallow those words before they came out.

"I don't think you'd be bothering him…" he said instead.

"Y-you really think so? But I haven't completely eliminated the effects of the aura…"

Noble let out a huff, growing annoyed with her waffling.

"Okay, fine. Then just give up, why dontcha?" he asked.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "H-how could you say something so horrible? I've worked so hard to make this… No! It's fine! An 80 percent reduction means the average person will just feel a little uneasy. I might be able to improve its efficacy if I continued researching, but that could take years. By then…Kanata will have forgotten about me!"

Lunaère's white face turned red as she grew agitated, and she gestured wildly.

"Hey, hey! Settle down, Lady! Giving up isn't an option. I know that. *You* know that. So…just go," said Noble.

Lunaère's eyes got wide.

"N-Noble…"

Noble felt a wave of relief wash over him; the indecisiveness had ended.

Lunaère squeezed the magic-formula cloth and scrunched her shoulders up.

"But…what do I even say when I find him? M-maybe it really is best if I don't go," she said.

Noble fell over on his side in exasperation. Lunaère continued to hesitantly talk herself through her concerns.

"A-and if Kanata has found a girlfriend, what do I do then? I don't think I could stand it! I really should just stay in Cocytus…"

Lunaère began to fidget, balling the magic cloth in her hands and wrinkling it.

"Let it go!" said Noble, rushing over to pry the fabric from her grip with his mouth, "It might tear! Look, I said he might find a girlfriend *someday*. Kanata's not the kinda guy who would forget about you in a few weeks."

"R-really?"

"Yeah. Don't you trust him?"

"Yes, but…"

"Buuut—if you keep wasting time being wishy-washy, then you can kiss him goodbye!"

Those words proved to be the incentive Lunaère needed. She rushed to stitch together the Impurity Sealing Robe. About an hour later, she placed the finished garment in her Dimension Pocket and walked out of the hut. Noble hurried to catch up.

"H-hang on! What about the rest of the stuff in the hut?!" he asked.

"I don't have time to clean up. A-another girl could steal him in the time I spend going through things," shouted Lunaère, walking away with her face turning red.

"Calm down, Lady! It'll only take a day to pack—"

"What if today's the day that changes everything?" asked Lunaère, her expression utterly serious now. Noble knew that face. Arguing was futile.

"…Okay, fine. Gimme ten minutes," he sighed, then went into the yurt and shoved any valuable item he could find into his mouth.

They set off for the 100th floor. Lunaère casually turned every monster they encountered into goo splattered on the dungeon walls. Eventually, word got around, and the monsters stopped coming.

It took them less than twelve hours to reach the bottom of Cocytus. A crystal path hovering over a yawning void spread out before them.

The rightful ruler of Cocytus stood at the far end.

"I am Satan—a mighty demon, essentially a god—and ruler of Cocytus. During my ten-thousand-year reign, you are only the sixth human to reach this room and bask in my glory. Only one person has left Cocytus alive."

Despite the invitation to bask in his glory, Lunaère's pace did not falter.

"H-hey, stop. Stop! Didn't you hear me? I am Satan, a demon nearly as powerful as the gods—"

"Get outta the way, moron! She *will* kill you!" shouted Noble, struggling to keep up behind Lunaère.

"Oh! M-Miss Lunaère?! P-please, be my guest! You may, of course, pass!" Satan hurried to the edge of the walkway to let her by. He was too slow.

"Gravity Bomb."

Lunaère cast the spell as she jogged past. A sphere of black light appeared near Satan, and stray pieces of broken crystal from his battle with Kanata began to get sucked into the gravity well.

"Wha?!" Satan leaped clear of the spell's effect just as it imploded. A moment slower and he would have been crushed.

Unfortunately, his jump took him over the edge of the walkway. Satan found himself hurtling into the abyss.

"AAAaaah!" His scream echoed through the chamber.

Noble paused for a moment to watch Satan disappear into the depths.

"Good luck crawling back up, chump."

“Hurry up, Noble,” Lunaère called. “The teleportation circle to the outside should be just ahead!”

6

NAIAROTOP FLOATED in the white space of the Upper Realms, observing their handwork. Magic circles appeared around them, opening tears that let them peer into other dimensions.

"You are working so hard, my beloved travelers. Ho ho, some of you are coming along quite nicely. Ijuin, that ego is pure charisma. Otogi, you used to be so boring, but your brand is on the rise now that I've pulled a few strings…"

A host of gods like Naiarotop worked behind the scenes to keep Locklore running. Each had their own duties; there were those who kept amusing records of the happenings in the world, others who arranged focus groups with the Higher Gods and sent those findings to the gods in charge of marketing, and even mid-level manager gods to oversee daily operations.

Among other things, Naiarotop's duties included sending people to Locklore, creating demon kings, and giving divine revelations to important characters. Sometimes they would run a plotline where a powerful warrior would succumb to a ruinous fate, or sometimes they would steer a "humanoid dragon" into a new scheme so that a traveler would have a proper nemesis. Essentially, they kept the drama moving along.

They'd even been behind the storyline that sealed away Zolophilia, five thousand years ago. A manmade god that destroyed demon kings and humanoid dragons alike would have been bad for continuity. Naiarotop liked to make sure their stories didn't develop plot holes.

"Takanashi, you…you are a bore." Naiarotop sighed. "I suppose she has her fans, but I am not one of them. I have tried so hard to nudge her in the right directions, but she is incapable of taking a hint. What is the point letting her live a comfortable life if she never takes any risks? Whatever. She can stay for now. I've got a season finale event planned for her soon, if I can convince this humanoid dragon to play along. Ha! I wonder if she can make a death scene interesting."

Naiarotop continued to monitor their feeds until a Higher God's voice called from the ether.

"My subject!"

"My lord? How may I be of service? If this is to discuss my job performance and impending promotion, then I humbly—"

"My subject, something unfortunate has occurred. Do you remember Kanata Kanbara?"

"Hm, Kanata Kanbara… Who was that again?" said Naiarotop, struggling to put a face to the name.

"He is the human you sent to Cocytus. The one who wanted to return to Earth because of his cat."

"Oh! Him! I sent him to Cocytus to make a comedy horror short where he would be eaten by monsters, piece by piece. Did it wrap up too quickly,

or was it not well received? It was fairly dark…" said Naiarotop with a chuckle as they covered their mouth.

"Weren't you paying attention? I bet you stopped watching after his arm was eaten by a mimic. Kanata Kanbara lives. He was saved by a lich girl."

"…Beg your pardon, my lord? There should be no monsters in that dungeon who would save a human…" Naiarotop's smile faded.

"You have neglected your duties in monitoring Cocytus. It appears a lich girl has lived there for centuries, and she has reached a level surpassing even that of the dungeon's overseer."

"W-wait! There must be some mistake. The lich girl loathes humans. She would never *save* one!" Naiarotop had a vague idea of who Lunaère was. They'd heard her speak of her hatred toward humans many times, and she never left the dungeon. What was the point of keeping tabs on her?

"How could you be fooled by such an obvious facade? You slipped up and left a dangerous lich to her own devices for hundreds of years."

Naiarotop's face grew paler and paler. "B-but it can't be that big of a problem! She'll never leave Cocytus. I will come up with something for Kanata Kanbara and tie up that loose end. If there are no other issues—"

"Oh, but there are. Are you aware that that humanoid dragon, Notts, attempted to awaken Zolophilia without your permission?"

"That bastard…" muttered Naiarotop to themself. "He must have found a chance to deceive me without drawing my attention! If he resurrects that beast, he'll destroy the balance of power in Locklore. I let one descendant of that family live because everyone loves a good callback, but that was obviously a mistake!"

There was nothing more irritating than someone flying under the radar. The world of Locklore was maintained with careful oversight so that otherworldly travelers could live out their stories with as little interference as possible. A vein throbbed on Naiarotop's temple.

"I hope you're sitting down, my subject. Because Zolophilia has already been summoned by Notts and defeated by Kanata Kanbara. *After* he left Cocytus."

"What?! But Zolophilia's lowest level is nearly 2,000. How could Kanata Kanbara—?"

"Another of my subjects has already recorded Kanata Kanbara's story in the Memory Sphere. Review it yourself. Furthermore, Lunaère the lich girl has also left Cocytus. Do you understand what this means?"

"…Th-that my mismanagement has created an abnormal situation…"

"Indeed. You have become a laughingstock among the Higher Gods, and your incompetence reflects very poorly on me."

Naiarotop cradled their head as they listened to their master's words. Disappointing a Higher God was the most terrifying prospect they could imagine.

“I-I will fix this, even if I have to go to Locklore and correct the mistakes myself. I will kill them—!”

“You most certainly will not! Do you know why? The selling point of Locklore is that it is the most extreme form of reality entertainment *ever*. Excessive interference is explicitly forbidden because if you break the immersion, the other gods will lose interest. And if they lose interest, your role will be *downsized*.”

“U-urgh…”

“Take care of those two as fast as possible, leaving as little trace as possible. Use every means available to you within the rules. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes, my lord. I will end those two immediately and resume monitoring Cocytus properly. This will never happen again. Please, just show me mercy!” Naiarotop bowed on both knees, sweat running down their face.

“That will depend on how you handle this. If you fail…well, *don’t fail.*”

“U-understood!”

With that, the Higher God’s voice cut off. Naiarotop clenched their fists and growled with resentment in their voice:

“Kanata Kanbara, you are *nothing*. You are a broken plaything that has brought me nothing but shame! Death isn’t good enough for you!”

Afterword

HELLO, this is Nekoko, the author of this novel. Thank you so much for buying the first volume of *Disciple of the Lich*!

The cover has Kanata, Pomera, Lunaère, and Noble, right? I thought about having just Kanata and Lunaère on the cover, but I wanted to showcase the bustling feel of the story in the first volume, so I settled on this image.

Let's talk a bit about some behind-the-scenes stuff. When choosing what to illustrate, you generally want to give even exposure to the main characters while choosing either pivotal scenes or scenes that typify the characters' daily lives. Then you need to think about the emotional impact the illustrations have and try to space them regularly through the book. It takes a lot of thought. Readers might get upset if the first half of the book is full of great illustrations and the second half is empty, right? I mean, I don't think you have to overplan it, but if nothing else, you should put some effort into making it even.

Having said that, this volume has a few unconventional illustrations in it. Yep, I'm talking about the Lovis ones. He only appeared in a couple of chapters and wasn't even a main character, yet he got two whole illustrations to himself.

I wanted two illustrations of him if possible: a serious one and one where he was desperately begging Kanata for mercy. And I got my wish.

I plan to have Lovis and his crew appear every once in a while in future volumes too. I'm not entirely sure what they'll be up to yet…

One other thing about the *Disciple of the Lich*: This work is now officially going to be turned into a manga for Overlap, Inc.'s website, *Comic Gardo*!

Kasei-sama is particularly good at drawing cute girls and will be in charge of the illustrations. I'm really looking forward to it!

Disciple of the Lich was written to bring Lunaère to the fore, so I think everyone will enjoy that aspect in the manga as well.

The manga version's online release is planned for fall of 2020!

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